The Halfway Point

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An alternate outcome of Eighteen Minutes. When a brother is attacked, the entire family is wounded. Sometimes, healing is harder than staying hurt. Winner of Best Tragedy/Angst in the 2007 TMNT Fanfic Awards.

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Chapter 1

Author's Notes: This is very dark. A somewhat graphic but not super-explicit non-consensual adult situation is told in pieces. It is not pornographic in the least, and no worse than an episode of *Law and Order: SVU* . Language is used (they use it, not me), and there is violence aplenty. I try to handle all these subjects with as much maturity as possible. If you like darkness, this is your thing. If you like dark h/c, this is your thing. If you want to test the waters of a genre darker than fluff, this is not your starting point. It is not necessary to read Eighteen Minutes to understand this, but I wouldn't complain if you did, and you would have a clearer picture of what happened prior to this fic. The story was nagged into me by the evil Aubretia Lycania and nurtured by a host of friends as it was written.

"Oh my god."

"Don't worry, Raph, we gotcha."

"Oh my god."

"Shut up. Get his legs."

"God, Leo, look at…look at his…"

"What?"

"Oh god…"

"Casey? What happened?"

"I dunno. He was like this when I found him. Just woke up long enough to save my ass."

"Leo, he's bleeding from…"

"What?"

"Oh god…"

"Deep breath, Don."

"I'm going to…"

"Casey, get the bucket."

"What is going on?"

"Sensei. Donatello is sick."

"I'm fine, Leo. It's just…"

"Aim for the bucket, Don."

"Leonardo, tend Raphael with me. Casey, see to Donatello."

"Sensei…"

"Yes, Donatello?"

"His…between his…under his…"

"Make sense, Don."

"The blood on his thighs."

"Let me…oh my god."

"What?"

"What is it?"

"What's going on?"

"There's blood everywhere. Coming from…from his-his rectum."

"His what?"

"Don't make me explain it, Casey."

"You mean his…you don't think they…"

"He's lost so much blood."

"His leg…god…"

"I'm gonna kill 'im."

"Wait for it, Casey, come help. You okay, Don?"

"I'm fine. How badly is he damaged...there?"

"It's bad. He's in shreds."

"If they punctured his intestine…shit."

"What is it, Donatello?"

"He won't live if that's the case."

"Leonardo, can you wake him?"

"That's the thing, sensei…he's not unconscious, I think…"

"Yes?"

"He's meditating."

"Don't wake him up. He needs sleep."

"He's not sleeping. He's completely awake."

"I don't think so."

"Mike, you're not even trying. Can't you tell? He's doing this consciously."

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Would you rather he were in a coma?"

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Answer me."

"Mike?"

"Yes."

"Mike…"

"If he's just lying there meditating, it means he's hiding. He's keeping from dealing with something. And that would mean you and Don…"

"Yes?"

"Shut up, Leo."

"Mikey…"

"I just…I can't handle it. I can't think that could have happened to him. Rape…happens to people we rescue. It doesn't happen to us. I mean…it's like there's this rule that…we're ninja, right? We're way better than those punks. Raph's so far above them he gets a nosebleed looking at 'em. But they pulled him down and…and they did this to him. And now, we're not so high above them. 'Cause they can do this to us. All they need is guns and they can render us completely helpless. And Raph…"

"Shhhhhh…"

"H-he's too good for this. He's a good guy, Leo, he didn't deserve… they had no right…"

"Hey…it's okay. We could be wrong."

"N-no. You're not."

"Will he live?"

"The bleeding's stopped. I don't think there's any more danger. I just…"

"Yes, my son?"

"D'you think he might have been unconscious when they…?"

"Donatello…I do not think there would be a reason for him to remain away from us if he was not aware of what was done to him. He is… fleeing the horror."

"…Sensei?"

"Yes?"

"Are you okay?"

"…No, Donatello. I am not."

"I am not."

"Hey. Um, Leo an' Splinter say you're conscious, so I guess I'll try talkin' to ya. See if you can hear me. Or at least, if ya pay attention.

"I jus' wanted you ta know…those goons're all dead. 'Cept one, actually. I dunno which one did it to ya, or if they all did, or what, but

the only one that got away was the big one. You took out the skinny Mexican guy yourself. Teach 'em ta hold you hostage. Looks like the only way they thought they could beatcha was…yeah. But they didn't. You're way beyond that.

"Ya know…the whole time they had you, an' I was tryin' a' steal that damn kidney for 'em…I was thinkin' about what I had ta do for the ransom, but after I totally blew it and the kidney ended up all over the sidewalk, I thought, why the hell am I bein' their bitch? This ain't no game, you were in trouble, an' the main thing was ta get you out. Thing is, it took me forever ta realize that. Took me forever to do what I shoulda done ta begin with, and I…

"Shit, Raph, I'm sorry. God, I am *so sorry.* It ain't your fault, you know that. It's my fault. I didn't get there in time. I shoulda told 'em ta shove their damn kidney up their damn asses. I…shhhhit.

"Y'know, I'm glad you ain't awake, I'd just be embarassin' myself. Don't usually cry. You know that. But…god, I hate myself. I was so stupid, so fuckin' stupid. I jus'…hope ya wake up soon. That way, I can stop wonderin' if ya hate me or forgive me. Either one'd be better'n not knowin'.

"So…I guess I'll seeya later. April an' I been here sometimes, helpin' out. So we'll prob'ly be here when you wake up, or…whatever it is you're gonna do. So…yeah. Seeya later."

Later in hell, Casey.

"Raphael. I know you can hear me."

Raphael opened his eyes and saw asphalt. He tasted it in his mouth. His cheek was bruised by it, shoved up against it. Two hands manacled each arm, tethering him to the pavement, and a pair of knees carrying a human's weight pierced into his thighs, shins running down his calves, rendering his legs helpless. Pain like he had never known in a place he'd never thought he'd know it. No

breath. Blood in his mouth. That was his own doing, as he bit hard on the inside of his cheek to occupy himself from the pain, to keep a building scream from escaping his tortured lungs. There was one conscious thought, and it had nothing to do with anger, or humiliation, or terror.

I have to get out of this.

He had to come out of this.

"Flip him over and sit him up so he can watch."

This was too much. Too much.

I have to get out of this.

It meant two things. He had to come out alive. He had to escape the pain, the terror, the rage, the humiliation. It meant two things. He had to survive. He had to stay sane.

He would give up the former for the latter.

But it was impossible when he was being forced to watch his own rape.

He could almost see it from outside his own body.

No.

A hand on his face.

No!

"Raphael."

They didn't know his name. Why were they calling him that? He should go back. It was better there, where the world was empty.

"Do not go back. You are safe now."

The last three words sounded with a familiar voice, although he could not pin down whose. Whatever, they were insane. There was no such thing as safety. It didn't happen in a world where people happily tortured each other.

"Raphael. My son."

No. That was going too far. How dare that voice be profaned with this memory?

"Look at me."

The vision imploded, and he could see the face of his sensei, master, father, feel the warmth of his hand, but the touch of asphalt still braised his skin, he could still feel the handle of the flashlight and the warm fist of his attacker between his thighs, the crushing grip of the hands on his arms…

"My son."

The sensations faded, leaving only aching muscles and soreness, blankets tangled around his ankles, the warm touch of his father's hand on his temple, and a cold stone sinking into the pit of his stomach.

"Sensei?"

"I am here, my son."

Splinter was weeping.

Splinter was weeping.

He knew.

They knew.

"Take it easy, Raph."

A foot slowly pressed against the next lowest step on the staircase, body still uncomfortable with walking even after four days in bed with an empty mind. Take it easy. No, it wasn't easy. He didn't like being talked to like a cripple. He also knew that that wasn't what his brother Leonardo had meant by his words. Leonardo did not want him to hurt himself. Raph knew his boundaries. Leo should know that. Leo probably did know that. But Leo was being his big brother self. Usually, it was irritating and comforting at the same time. Now, it was painful. It hurt because of what sparked it.

Leo knew.

"We gotcha, Raph," Mike said softly, offering a hand to steady his brother. Raph couldn't look at the compassion in Mike's eyes, and he certainly couldn't take the offered hand. Like he couldn't walk all of a sudden, just because it hurt. Just because he shouldn't be alive after being…

That was why he couldn't look at Mike. Mike, whose hero had been…

"There's eggs in a nest down here waiting for you," Don called from the kitchen, from whence the sizzling of a frying pan could be heard. Don didn't usually cook. But when Don was coping with something, he had to be productive. He had to do something. His hands had to move. Since he couldn't fix something mechanical, he fixed something culinary. In his own way, he was trying to fix his brother.

Raph wasn't hungry. Not for eggs fried to comfort Don's "poor baby brother." Not when Don knew.

"It's okay," he said hoarsely, backing up the stairs.

Leo caught his hand. "Raph, don't."

The feeling of skin against skin was too much. Raph snatched his hand away, the scratch of asphalt prickling against his face, eyes filling with the image of…

No.

He forced his eyes to focus on Leo's startled face, bile rising in his throat. Speech evaded him, his tongue and vocal cords refusing to work. Somehow, he had ended up sitting on the top step, and that hurt. Sitting. Just another locked door, another reminder that he was in a thick wool bag, smothering, unable to escape what had happened. Even sitting reminded him.

He shoved himself to his feet as Mike started forward, reaching. "Don't touch me!" he snapped, hands flying up to defend himself. He sounded like a trauma survivor in a movie, and hated it. He wasn't like them, those pallid, paranoid rape victims afraid to look anyone in the eye. Never. Raphael was better than this. Raphael was stronger than this.

Which is why he was not going to flee back into the safety of his room like a child frightened by shadows.

Nor into the safety of his mind. That was selfish and cowardly.

But it was so easy.

He was clutching the railing, eyes unfocused. The blurred shapes of his brothers were frozen, waiting for his next move, but he paid them little mind. He had to convince himself to move forward. Go downstairs. Eat some breakfast and not puke it up.

Careful step downward.

Pause.

"Quit starin' at me," he muttered.

Leo and Mike hastily turned away.

Step down.

He was not a cripple.

He was not a rape victim.

Step down.

He was just going to breakfast with his normal brothers, as usual.

Step down. The thought of breakfast made him want to hurl.

Step down. The pain was growing. Walking shouldn't hurt it. Why did it hurt?

Because Mikey had moved and gripped his arm. Now he was on the verge of another flashback.

Asphalt. Being forced into an unnatural position so he could see what was being done to him. The handle of the flashlight tearing worse as Jez twisted it. The scream he had held back tore its way out of him, and he jerked. Wrong thing to do. The flashlight tore him even more. He nearly passed out.

Sweat, sticky and salty and hot, from the hands of his captors gripping his arms. No chance of escape. *I have to get out of this* . One hand clutching the back of his head, forcing it to look down at his own humiliation. *I have to get OUT of this!*

Raph came to himself lying on the cool concrete floor at the bottom of the steps, head throbbing. Dim voices floated around him, and he was fairly certain they were all talking about him. He hated that. He closed his eyes again. The light made his head hurt more. Maybe he could pass out. Then he wouldn't have to deal with his brothers and their mothering.

"Don't move him." Leo's voice sank in.

Now he was being talked about like a victim on *Rescue 911* .
"M'okay," he mumbled, slowly turning over.

"No, Raph, stay where you are," Leo ordered.

Raph ignored him and rolled to his hands and knees, closing his eyes against the memories threatening to rush in with the position. He pushed himself to his feet. Sparks danced in front of his eyes, and his knees buckled.

Hands caught him from behind. "Gotcha," murmured Don.

"QUIT TOUCHING ME!" Raph snapped almost as a reflex, jerking away and nearly falling. Ignoring his brothers' shocked silence, he stormed toward the kitchen, trying not to wobble. The last thing he needed was for them to see more weakness from him. Now he just had to get this stupid breakfast over with. Prove he wasn't some sick hospital ward patient.

He sat down at the table like nothing was different. It didn't matter that it hurt to sit. He did not wince. He did not adjust his weight. When his brothers followed him into the kitchen, they saw him calmly waiting for them in his usual seat, not touching the glass of orange juice that Don had thoughtfully set out for him. No other place at the table was set. He was not going to take special treatment.

Breakfast was served silently. Normally, Raph liked the kind of eggs fried in a hole in a slice of bread, and since it was normal for him to enjoy them, he did not show anything else. His stomach protested the food, at first, but slowly adapted. He drank the juice and convinced himself that he felt better after getting a little food in his system.

He served himself another slice of bread and egg. "So what's been happenin' while I've been out?" he asked casually.

The only response he had was silence. He glanced up at Mike, the surest one to react to his fiery gaze.

He was right. "Not much," Mike said hastily. "I mean, for the first twenty-four hours we didn't even know if you'd live."

Don nudged Mike gently, sending him a warning look.

"Don't give him signals, Don," growled Raph. "I wanna hear what Mikey has to say. About his life."

Silence fell over the table. Raph stabbed his fork into a bite of fried toast and egg, dipping it in the runny yolk before shoveling it into his mouth. Not so bad. Not bad at all. "Well, Mikey?"

Mike cleared his throat. "So we haven't been doing much. Just… y'know. Practicing. Chores. Hoping you'd live." He fell silent, eyes falling to the table, and poked at his food.

Raph didn't really want Mike to talk about the past few days except to show indifference to them himself. He ceased to listen as Mike went into detail, focusing intently on the crust of his breakfast. Don, ever resourceful, used the circle cut out of the center of the bread as a tiny bit of toast. Raph had drizzled honey on it. The smooth sweetness combined with the butter it had been fried in crisped nicely between his teeth. The crackling sound of the bread filled his ears, drowning out Mike's oppressive words. Toast, eggs, honey, butter. Normal things. Things were okay. He took a long drink of orange juice, although the acid did nothing to relieve his slightly upset stomach.

"Raph," Don said softly, spreading apple butter over his bit of toast, "after breakfast, I'd like to perform a quick exam to make sure you haven't gotten infected or anything."

Raph choked on his juice.

"It wouldn't be invasive, just a blood sample to check your white blood cell count."

"Don…" Leo uttered warningly.

Raphael was done with breakfast. He shoved his dishes away, stood up, and left the room.

A few simple exchanges, and he knew what he had become to his brothers.

Their project.

Chapter 2

Mike scanned over his collection of DVDs, fingers running over the spines, lips silently reading the titles aloud. He glanced over his shoulder at Raph, who was on the couch, waiting for him. He did not look long, just long enough to wonder at his brother's position on the couch. Normally, Raph dominated the couch, sitting with both arms outstretched over the back and perhaps an ankle propped on the other knee. Now, he sat in one corner, feet together and planted on the floor. He was hunched over, as much as someone with a shell could hunch, shoulders drooped, his left arm hugging his chest, his right elbow on his knee, right hand propping his chin. Very closed off, and very unlike him.

His expression was uncomfortable as Mike glanced at him. His eyes narrowed. "What?"

Mike shrugged, turning back to his collection of movies. "Just lookin' atcha."

"Well, don't."

Those creeps hadn't violated his brother. They had replaced him with someone else.

Mike swallowed and tried to ignore the burn in his gut. Raph was different. Humorless. Blank. Paranoid. Raph probably didn't know how different he seemed. Didn't realize how much he flinched when someone came too close. Didn't feel how glazed his eyes were, how vacantly they stared into space even when Mike was doing his best to distract him. Didn't know how much he still limped, both from the gunshot wound and from…something else.

Raph certainly didn't know how many times Mike had woken up with him in the night, when he would hear his brother's vocal shudders as he broke away from a nightmare. Least of all he knew how long it

took Mike to get to sleep afterwards—at least as long as it took Raph, perhaps longer, as he sat up to keep vigil until he could hear the rhythmic breathing of sleep again.

Mike had his own nightmares, sometimes. He didn't remember all of them, but he could clearly remember having one where Bishop had kidnapped Raph and replaced him with a robot, and Mike was the only one who could tell the difference. In his dream, he had cried out for his brother to be returned to him, only to be told, " *This* is your brother now!"

He hated having such literal dreams.

Sometimes Mike cried, alone, in his room, but he had never heard Raph cry. Not even in solitude. He didn't even seem tempted to. Mike knew better than to expect Raph to break down into tears, but couldn't help thinking he should. However, despite his brother's shows of bravado, Mike knew how badly this had affected him. He knew because of how much Raph had changed.

He knew because of how much he had changed himself.

He knew because when those men had raped his brother, they had raped his entire family.

"Ya thinkin' *Die Hard* ?" Mike pulled the DVD halfway out of the stack to reveal half its title. The purpose of this exercise, he could hear Leo's voice saying in its practical tone, is to distract Raph in the basest way possible—lots and lots of stuff blowing up.

Raph shrugged. "Sounds good."

As Mike loaded the DVD into the player, he softly asked, "What's wrong with looking at you?"

"Nothin'. Just the way you were lookin'."

"How was I lookin'?"

"Like I was different."

Mike didn't answer.

"I'm not different, Mike. Nothin's different. Nothin's changed."

Everything's changed.

"I know," Mike said with a forced note of cheer. It wasn't false. It wasn't fake, the cheer. He didn't feel it, but it wasn't fake. It was done to help his brother. Nothing like that could be fake.

That was Mike's job now. To lift Raph up. To do what it took to get his brother on the right path, and stay with him along the way. To be his friend, like always. To postpone his own healing, which seemed somehow tied to Raph's anyway. He would be fine. He wasn't the one who had been…

"Raph?" Mike turned to see Don, the speaker, sitting by Raph on the couch. Raph didn't look at him. "I compared your white blood cell count with mine, and there was nothing unusual, but just in case…" He held up two orange pill bottles. "Here's some amoxicillin and a sleep aid. You're going to want to take the antibiotics three times a day until they run out. No skipping. If you skip, the bacteria in your leg will only get stronger instead of being killed by it, and resist further treatments. The amitriptyline is just to help you get some sleep."

"You gonna drug me?" muttered Raph.

"It's not a sleeping pill," protested Don, looking ever-so-slightly nervous, evidenced by the slight downward twitch of his eye ridges. "It doesn't make you sleep, it helps you get to sleep. You could pull an all-nighter on this if you really wanted, although it's not recommended."

Raph rolled his eyes. "Put 'em on the table, I'll take 'em later."

"I think you should take your first antibiotic now, just to get things started."

"Later, Donny."

Leo entered the room as Donatello silently gave in, rising with a sigh and drifting toward the kitchen. Mike met Leo's eyes, and knew what Leo knew—that Raph could control this, if nothing else. He didn't have to take Don's medicine. He didn't have to take care of himself.

What Mike did not know was that Leo also woke when Raph was frightened out of his nightmares, and would rise once his brother was asleep again and sit by him until it was nearly dawn. It was as though he had to protect his brother from nightmares, driving them away with his steely gaze as they floated overhead, lurking, taunting.

This was Leo's duty—to protect Raph from further threats, in his mind and in the world outside. To come between his brother and harm, always. This was made difficult when Raph denied all hurt and harm, denied his need for protection and guidance. He didn't seem to understand why his brothers were inclined to treat him delicately and resisted it like an enemy as monstrous as those who had attacked him.

"We're here!" called the voice of April from the lair door. Leo glanced over to see her hoisting groceries, a grim, silent Casey behind her with a watermelon. Raph, still folded upon the couch, glanced up noncommittally, face blank, eyes fastening on Casey.

Leo tapped his shoulder briefly. "C'mon," he murmured, pushing himself toward the door to help with the groceries. If Raph didn't want special treatment, Leo would humor him. He motioned to Mike, who sat on his other side. Mike rose to help, but Raph remained motionless. Leo held his arms out to take the watermelon from Casey, and noted as the fruit was transferred that Casey's eyes were fixed tightly on space, flickering only for the briefest of moments toward where Raph still sat on the couch.

"Raph, come help," Leo said calmly.

Something struck him from behind, and he slammed forward into the floor with barely enough time to catch himself. A body—two bodies—crushed him from above. Rolling out from underneath them quickly, he clamped onto the top one—Raphael—and yanked him away from Casey. Raph's hands gripped Casey too tightly for Leo to move him. One hand had Casey's arm, the other his throat.

"MIKEY!" bellowed Leo, but Mike was already there, wrestling with his near-psychotic brother, wrenching him from his victim. Casey gasped as Raphael's hand was torn from his throat. Leo dug his fingers into Raph's right arm while his brother railed, flinging himself every which way in an attempt to break away, screaming unintelligible curses at Casey. Mike held Raph's left arm and curled his own right arm around Raph's neck from behind, gritting his teeth as his heels dragged against concrete from Raph's raging.

"FUCK YOU!" Raph screamed, eyes vacant as vacuum. "FUCK YOU!"

"Get him out of here!" Leo shouted to April, who nodded and swiftly helped Casey pull himself to his feet.

When they were gone, Raph suddenly became dead weight in Leo's arms, sinking to the floor in exhaustion. Leo's grip tightened on his arm and yanked him upwards, countering the momentum pulling him to the floor and forcing him face-to-face. "What the hell was that?" he hissed.

Raph blinked, frowning, eyes wide and darting about. He suddenly jerked out of Leo's grip and stumbled backward. "What…?"

"You almost killed him!"

"Killed—"

"Casey is an idiot. But he couldn't have known what was going to happen to you."

"What are you—"

"Dude!" Mike broke in sharply. "He doesn't know what he did!"

"SHUT UP MIKEY!" shouted Raph, not looking at either of his brothers.

Leo folded his arms. "He knows exactly what he did. Listen, I know you judge Casey for not being there in time, but to take it this far—"

"SHUT UP!" bellowed Raph, covering his ears with his hands. "SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP! I d-d-don't—"

"Leonardo! Raphael!"

Leo bit back his next comment and faced Splinter, who had entered the room with a frown on his face. "Leonardo, calm yourself. Raphael, come with me."

"Sensei," Raph protested, shaking his head softly as though unable to believe something.

"Raphael," Splinter said gently but firmly, his tone forcing Raph's eyes to meet his. Raph gritted his teeth, hands sliding from his ears to clench at his sides. Without a glance at his brothers, he followed his master into his room.

Raphael sank to his knees on the rug as Splinter sat down opposite him. Raphael was shaking so hard that his head was nodding back and forth. His eyes were unfocused, pupils constricted, hands twitching on his knees.

Splinter took a deep breath. "I have not brought you here to berate you, my son."

"Y-y-you…" Raphael sucked his lips into his mouth and bit.

"I have brought you here to calm you." Splinter caught his son's eyes, holding his gaze gently but steadfastly. "You have suffered a great deal, Raphael. Many would break from it, and you have not."

A bitter laugh escaped Raphael's lips. "Th-th-th-that's easy for y-you t' s-s-say."

Splinter resisted the temptation to reach out and touch his son's face as he normally would have done, hand curling into a fist at his side. "Raphael. I have seen men break for less. One of your greatest enemies was a broken man, broken when his cruel-hearted brother was killed for beating a woman."

A spark lit in Raphael's eyes, and he stared at his master in silence.

"We are broken, Raphael, when we allow ourselves to become subservient to our experiences. Oroku Saki was a broken man, and in his brokenness, devoted his life to the purpose of vengeance. Those whose lives are shaped by misfortune…they are broken."

Splinter almost felt outside of his own body, listening to his own words, and while he spoke the name of his enemy, he knew he was not speaking of him.

"But you, my son…"

"M-my life's so n-n-n-normal," sneered Raphael.

"You have attempted to move on and live as you normally would. But I fear that, in doing this, you will never accept what has happened to you." Splinter did reach out now, gently brushing Raphael's cheek with his fingers. For once, Raphael did not flinch or look away, but all his muscles seemed to unwind at once, and his eyes closed. "Accepting what has happened is not the same thing as breaking, my son. In fact, it may be the only way to remain whole."

"B- but…" Raphael's eyelids fluttered as though in a preemptive strike against threatening tears. "I…" He swallowed. "Wh-what's to

accept? I-It…if I a-a-a-accept…what'll hap—" He looked frustrated, a grimace creasing his face. "Damn, I can't t-t-talk anymore."

"I understand more than your words, my son." Splinter's thumb gently pressed reassuringly into Raphael's cheek. "You may not be ready to accept this terrible thing, and that I can understand. But in the future, it must become a part of your life, or it will take over your life. You must either let it become a part of you, or let it become all of you. There is no other choice." Slowly, so that Raphael would have time to pull away if he felt the need, he leaned forward to plant a soft kiss on his son's forehead. Raphael's head bowed as Splinter's lips touched his skin briefly, then drew away, hand moving to cup his son's face. "I know it will not be easy, but I also know your strength, and I believe you will overcome this."

Raphael remained silent, and did not meet his father's eyes.

Chapter 3

Raphael had been put on antibiotics and a sleep aid, both approved by Donatello. What Don knew that Raph did not was precisely what the sleep aid did. He knew how it increased the brain's level of triptophyn. He knew its use as a muscle relaxant. He knew it prevented headaches. He also knew all that was simply a side effect of a very common, but effective, anti-depressant.

Raph certainly did not know about that part.

And Don was not about to tell him.

The stuttering was bad enough without him learning that his brother was drugging him.

The stutter was what had made Raphael become completely silent. The haunted look in his eyes told Don that his little brother had no dignity left but his silence, his refusal to sound like a simpleton when speaking. The stuttering didn't matter to Don, or to anyone else, but it mattered to Raph, and if silence made Raph feel better, Don was not going to argue with him. Anything that kept him sane was a good thing right now.

At first, Leo had thought Raph was simply giving them the silent treatment after the incident with Casey. When Splinter had quietly taken them aside and explained the situation, Leo had felt terrible, as evidenced by the shadowed look of embarrassment on his normally smooth face. Not everyone could read that. But when someone was as understated as Leo, those who knew him could detect any change. And Leo had that look of embarrassment, concern, and responsibility.

"He started stuttering when we were arguing. I thought it had just been momentary."

In other words, Leo blamed himself for his brother's sudden speech impediment. That didn't surprise Don. It probably *was* Leo's fault, if his judgment had sent Raph over the edge. But it wasn't just because of Leo. Don had been the one to bathe Raph after his rescue. He had a pretty good idea of what Raph had gone through.

Raph lay in the shower, still as death, with water dancing off his shell as Don frantically removed congealed blood from his body in order to assess the damage and clean any open wounds before they festered. Don was having to constantly reassure himself that he was not going to throw up, as the water washed away curtains of filth and revealed the damage that had been done—bruises everywhere, loose teeth, the bullet wound in the thigh that Don was poised to attack with a pair of tweezers, but most horrifyingly, under Raph's tail. A turtle's anus, unlike a human's, is shaped like a slit.

Not anymore.

Don's stomach took over again and he whirled to duck his head into the trash can. He had emptied his stomach long ago, and tears milked into his eyes as his body spasmed with dry heaves. Once they were over, the spasms changed into sobs, as he cried into the trash can in the bathroom, as helpless with grief as his brother was now. The vomiting had stopped, but the nausea did not, and there was no cure for it.

Tears ran down his face, covered his eyes, salt water against his parched lips still flecked with dried bile. He was a wreck. No control, not over this, not over anything if he could not fix this. Everything else was meaningless if he couldn't keep his brother alive.

Breathe.

Deep breath.

He closed his eyes, knocking the last few tears down his cheeks. Muscles tightening against tight muscles, he forced his hands to stop shaking, and picked up the tweezers.

Had to get the bullet out. Had to do what he could to keep Raphael alive.

To keep himself from falling to pieces.

This wasn't his brother. It was a machine, just like any other body, and he could fix machines.

He could fix this.

With his mind thus detached from his heart in defense against this chaos, Donatello set to work.

"You're not taking your meds," Don said softly, sitting beside Raph on the couch. He and Mike had been watching the second *Die Hard* movie, and Mike had gotten up to get a drink.

Raph grunted, refusing to take his eyes off the television screen.

Don sighed. "Raph, you can't hold off like this. We live in a sewer. Your leg getting infected isn't a possibility, it's a likelihood."

That got no response.

"Fine," snapped Don, at the end of his patience. "I'll say it. If you don't take the antibiotics, you'll probably die." He watched Raph for a response.

There was none.

"Okay, I get it. You're being melodramatic and telling me you want to die. I don't care. Take the meds. We spent too much energy keeping you alive for you to kill yourself."

This made Raph shoot an intense glare at Don, but he still said nothing.

Don folded his arms. "Either contradict me and justify yourself, or take the meds." He held out a paper cup with the antibiotics and the

amitriptyline, a red capsule and a blue tablet.

Raph stared at them for a moment. He picked the amoxicillin out of the cup and held it up before Don for a moment before swallowing it with a swig of water from his bottle. He left the blue pill in the cup and turned back to the television.

Don hissed and stood up, turning away in frustration. Let him act like a defiant child. Don was only trying to help him. If Raph didn't want him to help, that was his loss. The anti-depressants weren't harmful, and Raph didn't even know that was what they were.

Or did he?

No, of course he didn't.

"How are you feeling?" Mike asked as he sat back down beside Raph, drinks in hand.

Everyone asked Raphael how he was feeling. No one ever asked Raphael what he was thinking. Contrary to what his brothers believed, Raphael did a lot of thinking. He thought constantly. But his thoughts came in the forms of sounds and shapes, feelings and images, and what he knew to be truth he could never explain.

Mike tilted his head slightly towards his brother, eyes still on the television. "I know you won't talk to me, it's just…I wish you would. I don't care how you talk, you know that. And…there are some things I have to know. Like…I have to know if you're okay."

Raphael wasn't okay. Raphael's body had once been sacred to him. He never smoked, rarely drank, trained, exercised, ate right, and took care of himself when he was wounded. Too much of his life had been spent maintaining his body to perfection for it to become public entertainment for a bunch of pee-ons. But it had, and that was anything but okay.

"I mean, it must've been bad, for you to go all comatose for all that time."

It had been the only way to escape. Raph tried to focus on the television, but a veil passed over his vision, interposed over the screen. It bore images of a Brazilian gangster, squealing with delight as a truncated scream burst from Raph's throat.

"Look, he likes it! Dirty little whore likes it!"

Too much. Too far.

Raph spat at him. Jezimar frowned suddenly, a strange expression on such a bright face, and wiped the spittle from his skin with a long, gaunt hand. "Jimmy, hold his mouth open."

Pain as his jaw was forced open by a forceful pair of hands, the third gangster slipping behind to hold his arms. Strange relief as he felt the absence of intrusion and saw the bloody flashlight before his eyes. Jezimar was grinning broadly again, tilting the object so it glinted in the dim street light. Then, an explosion of pain in his teeth as the handle of the flashlight was forced between them, back, back, into his throat, and he choked on the instrument of his rape and his own blood, and nearly vomited.

"Swallow," Jezimar ordered, a trickle of irrepressible glee entering his voice.

Too much. He had to get out of this.

"Swallow!" The command was more forceful, and the flashlight was shoved harder against his tongue.

Focus.

Splinter's voice.

Focus, and empty your mind.

Raphael spat to clear his mouth of the filth, gagged, suppressed the urge to throw up.

Clear.

Focus.

Calm.

Nothing.

Pure relief.

Empty .

And for once, escape was that easy.

"Raph?"

For once, complete emptiness of mind, just like Splinter said.

"Raph?"

No better time. No better place.

"Raph?"

Raph focused in hard on the television, unable to look at his brother. He knew what Mike looked like. He knew he looked afraid and concerned, his empathetic brother with his heart on his sleeve, and couldn't bear to see that look directed at him.

"You got that look again. Wanna pick out another movie?"

Had Mike discerned a way to tell when Raph was flashing back? How typical of him. He'd always had a way of tuning in to his brothers' frequencies without them knowing how. However uncomfortable Raph was with this uncanny ability, a movie sounded good. Distraction sounded good. He nodded.

"What do you want to watch?"

Making hand signals and body language was nearly as humiliating as stuttering. Raph carefully got to his feet and made his way over to the DVD collection. Something brainless, but not overly comic or cheery. With lots of explosions. Explosions were good.

Yes, explosions were good.

April had cut him off. That sucked.

Casey stared drunkenly at the ceiling of his apartment, imagining a million ways that night could have gone differently.

Ideally, he would have turned right around and rescued Raph from those freaks. Eighteen minutes. They had given him eighteen minutes to complete a ransom. It was freaking impossible. And he'd known, on some level beneath thought, that the gangsters weren't going to let Raph loose without coloring him. But to rape him…that hadn't entered Casey's mind. Not much had during those minutes. He barely remembered any one of those minutes, except for a few instances that haunted every waking thought.

Spitting out a mouthful of sidewalk and looking up to find the kidney he'd been sent to steal splattered all over it.

Waiting for a walk sign to let him across the street.

Glancing over to see Raph on his knees, looking like hell warmed over, holding a gun after shooting the man who'd been trying to kill Casey.

Raph had done better that night as the hostage than Casey had as the rescuer.

Another possibility was for him to have remembered his cell phone. He could have called the guys. They could have come in and

ambushed the punks that ambushed him and Raph. See how they felt.

He could have kept a better eye out for Raph. He could have taken that bullet for him, the careless bullet that had forced Casey to fulfill the ransom when they had originally wanted the ninja. Raph wouldn't have let them do anything. Raph would have done the right thing instead of fooling around, trying to meet their impossible demands.

Maybe he could have even explained things to the police. They could have let him through with the kidney and followed him after he escaped with Raph.

Millions of possibilities, and he had chosen the worst one.

He had tried to do exactly what they had told him to do.

And because of that, Raph's life had been jeopardized. Not just his life. Raph probably would have preferred to die over this.

Yes, of all the possible outcomes of those few minutes, this was the worst.

That was why Casey was lying alone in his apartment, staring drunkenly at the ceiling.

This worst possible outcome was, without doubt or contest, all his fault.

"Raph, can I talk to you?"

Raph glanced over the back of the couch at Leo, who stood with his arms folded and what was probably a very stony expression on his face. He had been told he looked dead when he was delivering bad news.

He watched as his brother slowly rose from the couch and limped around it. He leaned against the back of it, folded his arms, and waited.

Deep breath. Raph wasn't going to like this. "Master Splinter and I have been talking, and…" He looked Raph straight in the eye. "Until you can talk, you're forbidden to go topside."

The wide-eyed look of indignation from Raph needed no words. The temperamental turtle's lips drew back, revealing teeth. Leo could tell that there was something he wanted to say that he wouldn't speak aloud and physically could not perform with his number of fingers.

"You can't become a liability, Raph. If you can't call for help, you can't go topside."

Raph's throat was working, the pulse in his carotid artery clearly visible as the veins in his neck popped out from rage.

"It's not my order, it's Splinter's. So don't get mad at me."

"In other words," Raph muttered through gritted teeth, "if you c-c-c-can't p-put your thumb on me from here, I c-c-can't g-go there. Fuck you, Leo." A look of great relief passed over his face as he discovered the one sentence he could utter without embarrassment, and a slight smile touched his mouth.

Leo's eyes narrowed. He was not at all thrilled with his brother's discovery. "Fuck you, Raph," he shot back. "You know why we're doing this."

"Y-you think I'm some fucking invalid. I'm sick of your c-c-crap." A frustrated look crossed Raph's face with the last word.

"You're still having flashbacks, Raph!" snapped Leo. "Nothing in particular seems to cause them, besides invading your personal bubble, and if we're out fighting, or if you're out fighting alone, it

could literally paralyze you. Where the heck would you go, anyway? It's not like you're hanging around Casey anymore."

"I g-g-g-got to g-get out!" Raph cried, almost as though a part of him had broken a little. His lips were still drawn back in a sneer, eyes sparking fire, and Leo thought he could lift the shadow over his face like a veil. "I c-c-can't stand this p-place, not with you fuckin' mothering me! I'm g-gonna die here, I'm gonna go c-c-c--" He stopped suddenly and turned away, sighing out the last of his word in a huff of breath and storming toward the couch, where Mikey sat with his video game on pause.

"Raph," Leo said, mustering the last of his patience, "I can see why you feel that way—"

"D-d-"

"--but you have got to stay alive. Do you…can you even understand what it was like for us?"

"For YOU?"

"You almost died, Raph. We almost lost you. I can't…you…" Leo hissed a frustrated sigh. "Listen, if it had happened to me, I know you guys would be worried. But it didn't happen to me. It happened to you, and…" His voice shook, and he forced it to steady. "If I could, I'd take it on myself. If I could, it would have happened to me instead. But I can't do that. The only thing I can do is protect you, and you have to let me do that."

Mike, who had been pretending not to hear, had turned his head and was listening now. Raph stood by the couch, his back turned toward Leo, frozen and silent. Leo could hear nothing but the movement within the pipes above their heads, and his own slow breathing.

"You c-c-can't even d-do that, Leo," murmured Raph. He slid down to sit by Mike.

That was it. Leo had to leave or embarrass himself. Sucking in a deep breath, he quickly trotted up the stairs and into his room, closing the door swiftly but softly behind him. Sinking onto his bed, he allowed his tears to seep from his eyes, but not to spill.

When he tried to empty his mind, his mind was left with himself, hands tied, as helpless as his brother had been on the asphalt.

Chapter 4

Mike hung his jacket up on the coat rack by the door of Casey and April's apartment. "April not here?"

Casey rummaged around in the refrigerator and yanked out two bottles of beer. "She's makin' a grocery run for you guys. She'll be back…whenever."

Mike grinned and flopped down on the couch. "Didn't tell you, huh?"

"She said it'd be about an hour. It usually takes a lot longer." Casey opened both bottles and walked over to the couch. "Here ya go," he muttered, handing a bottle to Mike, who gave him an idle salute as he took a swig. Casey eased down beside him and took a long drink. He wished April would make a grocery run for *them* . All the beer they had left was the cheap light stuff he and Raph used to call water.

Raph…

"She thinks I'm stupid," Casey said softly,

Mike glanced over at him. "April?"

"Yeah," sighed Casey, sinking back into the couch cushions. "She thinks I don't know why she stays out late."

Mike frowned. "You think—"

"I mean, no, I don't think she's havin' an affair. She just drives around all night. Comes in after I'm in bed. Doesn't talk to me, just gets ready and goes to sleep."

"Why do you think?"

Casey looked at Mike, finding openness and understanding that he could not comprehend. "Why do *you* think, Mikey?" he snapped, suddenly irritated.

"All I'm saying is, she shouldn't blame you—"

"Yeah, she should! I don't know why you even talk to me! The others don't!"

"The others don't get it," argued Mike, a spark igniting in his eyes.

"Get what?"

"Until you and April, we didn't have any friends, no allies, nothing. What we've got is too important to ruin it when you weren't even the one doin' it!"

Casey shot to his feet and stood over Mike. "RAPH TRUSTED ME!" he snarled. "For god's sake, Mikey, *get mad* !"

"So what you're saying is, you want me to hate you?" Mike stood and stared at him with intensity.

"Fuck yeah!"

"Fine, I hate you," growled Mike. "That so much better now?"

"Does you some good, at least."

"It makes me feel like shit, Case. The family needs you, hell, you're a *part* of the family, and I'm tryin' a' *keep* you a part of the family. That so bad?"

"I ain't got a right to be in your family anymore, you got that?"

"And what the hell did you do?" Mike folded his arms. "You did what you could, Casey. If there was anything you coulda done, you'd've done it. And I don't think it's right for April, or Raph, or anyone else to punish you like this."

Casey stared at him. "What'd Splinter tell you?"

"Just what happened. That you saved my brother's life."

The longer Michelangelo held him in his forgiving gaze, the smaller Casey Jones shrunk. He sank back onto the couch, picked up the remote, and turned the television on, but its sound mingled with the words of Splinter over a week before.

" *Sit down, Casey."*

Casey could tell that Splinter was using a lot of concentration to keep as passive as possible. He swallowed and sat crosslegged in front of the rat sensei, shaken to the core by the events of the night. Don was in the bathroom cleaning a comatose Raph. Leo and Mike were out in the living room, waiting for April to arrive. Splinter had immediately wanted to talk to Casey when they arrived at the lair, and Casey, stunned and more than a little sickened, had followed dumbly.

Splinter lit two candles and sat in front of Casey. "Now." His eyes slid closed, and his breath quickened suddenly, chest rising and falling in quiet heaves, subsiding only a little before his eyes opened again. "Tell me what has happened to my son," he said, voice strained, "and why you could not prevent it."

Casey swallowed again and took a deep breath, head hanging in shame. "I…Raph and me got ambushed. While we were out. Raph got shot in the leg, and they told me…I had to steal some d—some kidney." He glanced up guiltily to see if Splinter had noticed the near-slip. Splinter's eyes were cold, and did not change. Casey looked back down at the floor. "Anyway, ah, they told me if I didn't get it for them by the top a' the hour, they'd kill 'im. An'…"

" *And you agreed?" The strain in Splinter's voice grew tighter.*

" *There were a bunch of 'em, an' they all had guns—"*

" *Casey," hissed Splinter. Casey glanced up to see that Splinter's fur was standing on end, giving him a truly frightening magnified size. "If there had been armies of them, all with weapons, you should not have left my son alone."*

Casey felt like he had been kicked hard in the stomach. "I know, I know—"

" *You knew?" Splinter's voice grew hushed. "And you left him nonetheless?"*

" *I mean, I didn't think—"*

" *You have fought these men all your life, Mr. Jones, and you did not think they would harm him?"*

" *I didn't have* time *—"*

Splinter raised a hand, throat constricted to the point of agony from rage and pain. "Leave this place, Mr. Jones."

Casey hesitated, eyes wide, as if he didn't expect Splinter to mean what he said.

" *NOW!" shouted Splinter.*

Casey scrambled to his feet and shot out of the room as though the hellfire from Splinter's eyes would roast him alive.

Splinter often regretted his harshness towards the man who had been their true ally for so long. At the same time, forgiveness was difficult. This true ally had failed his son so utterly that Splinter was not sure if Casey could regain his trust. He had allowed Casey access to the lair only until Raphael had made a sudden attempt upon his life. After that, Casey was restricted from the lair for his own good, and secretly, so that Splinter did not stand and watch Raphael murder their friend. Splinter was angry, but Casey bore the least of his anger.

Splinter had spent four long days and three sleepless nights by his son's bed. He had told little of the full story to his sons; he would let Raphael control how much they knew, for all heaven knew how little control Raphael had had in this matter. How much worse it must be for him than it was for Splinter, whose dreams were haunted by visions of his son's defilement at the hands of men who laughed at him and spit on him—

Splinter covered his face with his hands, breathing deeply to cleanse his mind of the image. Raphael, his trouble child. Raphael, his brave soul, his proud and loyal Raphael, violated by demons and darkness, helpless beneath their filthy hands. Much pain had been cured, when Raphael was small, with stories and chocolate and gentle lullabies. But this time, Splinter could do nothing. This was one cruelty he could not kiss away.

He lit two candles and settled into a lotus position. His eyes slid closed. He would meditate and approach this problem with a clear mind, if possible. He had taught his sons enough about sex that they knew what caused their urges, and how to deal with them. Never had he thought that he would have to teach them something about sex that he himself could comprehend very little. Forced sex. Not even sex, but a mockery meant for torture and dominance.

His eyes squeezed together, and his brow furrowed. Why did this impossible thing happen to his son? His *son* . His child, as much as if Raphael had been born of Splinter's flesh and blood. His own child, tortured and confused upon the pavement, so stricken with shock at what had happened to him that he receded into his own mind for days, bewildered because his father had not thought to tell him this could happen. Because his father had not taken into account that a person's cruelty could overwhelm their disgust for appearance.

Because his father had failed him.

Splinter could not meditate that night.

Mike slipped his jacket off and hung it over his arm as he entered the lair. It was well after midnight. He quietly padded toward the steps, but as he began his ascent, he glanced upward to see Leo standing at the top, arms folded.

"April said you and Casey had plans," Leo said quietly.

Mike bristled. "Yeah, what's it to you?"

Leo descended a few steps, gaze never wavering. "It's nothing to me. And I'm not telling you to stop hanging out with him. But I have to remind you—"

"What?" snapped Mike, falling back a few steps, ready to turn and get a soda rather than face down his brother. "That Splinter thinks it's Casey's fault Raph…I mean…it's not his fault!"

That made Leo take two quick steps down. "Raph trusted Casey to cover him. If their situations were reversed, Raph would've saved Casey."

"If Casey could've saved him—what, you think he *wanted* it to happen?"

"Of course not!"

"Then why the hell are you banning him from our lives?"

"I am not--no one is banning him from our lives."

"Coulda fooled me."

"He can't come here because we can't have Raph going ballistic again."

"You don't want him to come here."

"I don't want to see his face right now, can you blame me?"

"Obviously, I do."

"What are you--Think, Mikey! Raph was there, in their hands, long enough to be raped and beaten. Casey was sent to fulfill a ransom. If he had done what he should've done, he would've gotten out of their sight, circled back to him *immediately* , and used the element of surprise to his advantage."

There went Leo talking tactics.

"If he came back immediately, he'd've stood there and watched them, which isn't possible. Therefore—"

"Casey did what he thought he could do," retorted Mike.

"Therefore, Casey actually *left him there* with men he *knew* to be rapists and murderers and actually expected them to fulfill their end of the bargain if he fulfilled his!"

"I'm not saying he was smart—"

"I'm saying Casey can't be trusted anymore!" Leo's eyes were like dark infernos, burning without glow, twin voids of flame.

"SHUT UP!" screamed Mike, trembling with rage. "YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT HE'S GOING THROUGH!"

"Oh what, he's sorry? I knew that, Mike, and he damn well *should* be."

All at once, Mike's rage imploded and seemed to be sucked back into him. He turned and marched toward the kitchen, away from Leo.

Leo thundered down the rest of the steps and followed him. "You don't get away that easily, Mikey. I'm worried about you—"

Mike breezed into the kitchen. "You've lost it, Leo. The people you need to worry about are Raph and Casey."

"If you feel like Casey needs help, by all means, help him, but don't stand there and tell me he did nothing wrong! And I AM worried about you! That's the first time I've seen you get mad about this."

"So what?"

"It's not healthy, Mikey. You spend hours watching movies with Raph, trying to help him, and that's good. But you're not dealing with how *you're* feeling, and that worries me."

"Of all people, Leo, I am the one you should worry about the *least* . The important thing is—"

"—Is keeping the family together—"

"And to do that, we gotta help the people who need it."

"Yes. That means you."

Mike gestured wildly with his hands, unable to believe his ears. "Wha…I didn't get attacked, Leo."

"No, but your brother did."

"Leave me alone, why should I—"

"Your *brother* , Mike. Doesn't that make you a little bit angry?"

"Yes, it does, but—"

"You don't want to deal with it because it's hard to deal with."

"Shut up, Leo, there's nothing to deal with, I know what I have to do, and it's working a lot better than anything you've come up with."

"What—"

"You and Don just smother him, and you tell both of us how we're supposed to feel, but we DON'T! You keep talking to Raph like it's a

thing to talk about in front of everyone and it makes him feel horrible and…and you're making it seem like there's something wrong with him because he doesn't want to talk about it!"

"I *never* said th—"

"Since when did Raph *not* deal with things on his own? You got that when that leech bit him, why don't you get it now?"

"Mikey, if you'd—"

"Is it because *you* feel better by barging in?"

A sharp voice interrupted with a hiss. "Guys!"

Mike and Leo turned to Donatello, who glared sleepily at them. "It's almost one o'clock in the morning and you're shouting at the tops of your lungs in a place that echoes. I don't know about you two, but I need sleep, and so do Splinter and R—"

"You're no better," Mike shot at him. "It's like Raph's some toaster you're putting back together—"

Don held up his hands, signaling silence. "I'm sure you have something very important to say," he said bitterly, "but right now, it's one A.M, and I'm not very receptive, so it'll have to wait for the morning." With that, he turned away. Before walking back to his room, he turned his head to murmur, "Hypocrite."

Mike launched himself at Don. He was caught by Leo, who twisted his arms behind his shell and held him as he strained against him. Don smoothly walked out of the kitchen to his bedroom.

Not every dream Raphael had was a nightmare. Sometimes he dreamed of digging a grave and burying himself in it, then stepping out of it, the soft earth filtering away every torment and darkness.

He didn't know what it meant.

Not every nightmare Raphael had was about that night. He had nightmares of falling, of thousands of bugs laying eggs in his skin and causing him to bleed to death when they hatched, of five gangsters moving into the lair and his family—particularly Casey—being nonchalant about it in spite of their knowing grins and glances in his direction.

He knew what those meant, thanks.

He kept having one dream where he glanced over from his bed and found Leo sitting there, holding a naked sword in one hand. One night, he dreamt that Splinter relieved Leo and took his place in the chair, leaning over Raphael and smoothing his forehead with a soft hand, so gently that he might have been a ghost.

He wasn't convinced that was a dream, actually.

After that, whenever he dreamed about digging his grave, he could hear Splinter's voice hovering in the air, sweetening it with its mellow tones spinning an ancient lullaby, and the sky was embraced with a host of colors and curls, scents of fresh earth and grass and the touch of sunlight. And when every evil in him was left in the grave, he could suddenly see…

It was impossible to finish the dream, to raise his eyes and capture the visions he knew were meant for him. Regardless, he came away with a message from the dream itself, if that made sense.

Let go. Leave behind.

"Just a stupid dream."

We are broken, Raphael, when we allow ourselves to become subservient to our experiences.

But if his brothers had come into his room the next few nights, they would have found him perusing the phone book for anyone whose first or last name was House. On his face was the look of a man set to kill.

Chapter 5

April O'Neil sat in her car and thought about breaking up with her boyfriend.

The thought made her feel sick. Very sick. She had used up an entire roll of antacids in the last four days, and still felt sick. She sometimes didn't even come to bed, just lay on the couch all night so she wouldn't wake Casey with her indigestion. In the end, she knew that breaking up with Casey would be something she couldn't handle right now.

She took a deep breath and reached into her purse for another antacid. She didn't want to break up with Casey. At the same time, she didn't want to lose her surrogate family, and she had the horrible feeling that it would come down to one of the two.

No, April, we would never make you choose between us and Casey! It'll be fine, you'll see!

She heard the cartoony mockery of one of their voices in her head, she didn't know which. She could almost picture a turtle sock puppet blabbing the words liplessly, with vacant felt eyes frozen in an exaggerated expression of enthusiasm. Life wasn't like that. Life wasn't made of polyester pom-poms. Life made you choose between your family and your boyfriend because neither could stand the other. That was just the way things happened.

If she'd asked any one of the turtles, or Splinter, the only one who would have told her that Casey wasn't welcome in their lives anymore was Raphael, and he would be judging by his current feelings, as he always did. It wasn't that no one believed Casey was still a part of that family as much as April. It was that no one was sure how precarious his position was. He couldn't keep seeing them if Raph was going to try to kill him every time he saw him. He couldn't keep seeing them if he was going to be a source of

contention that could break up the family. And for all they knew, he couldn't be trusted anymore. He'd come through for them so many times, but that made this mistake that much worse. Trust is harder to repair than it is to break, especially when expectations had been so high.

April would be lying if she said she wasn't angry with Casey. Not just for the immediate consequences of his actions, either. Casey's screw-up had put her here, in this car, where she sat, wondering if she would have to choose between the two greatest things that had ever happened to her.

They had all gotten along without Casey long before this. At the same time, they knew that their family was already broken without him. All of them, especially April. She could feel it every time she was in the lair. And there was nothing she could do about it. She didn't have the magic glue, and neither did Casey. The only person who could make it right was Raphael, and he wasn't in the mood for forgiveness. But if he did, the rest of the family would be obliged to follow suit.

It was after one in the morning. April sighed and got out of the car, walked slowly to her apartment. The hardest part of the day was coming home and facing him. She was the liaison. On one hand, she was betraying Casey by remaining in good standing with the others while he was not. On the other hand, she was betraying the others by dating Casey. It was irrational, completely so, but those were her feelings. It was also cowardly to wait until he went to bed to come home. But that would change.

She wasn't going to live without him. She knew that. It was her choice to come home at all, because no matter what he had done, or hadn't done, he was still worth it.

Always worth it.

When she reached her apartment, her eyes latched onto a note written on lined paper and taped to the door. It was his handwriting.

Her eyes scanned the note, written slowly and thoughtfully, the best handwriting she'd seen him use. Sharp and masculine, she could almost smell his cologne simply by reading it. But the words, the words…

April's heart stopped.

Dear April,

I fucked up big. I lost my family, and worse, I'm losing you. So I've come to a decision. I'm gonna go out and find the one guy who got away, and I'm gonna do what I should have done that night. He probably won't be alone, so I probably won't come back. But I'll make things right or die trying.

I love you.

Casey

Without a moment to waste, April turned and flew back down the stairs.

Donatello was dissatisfied with his patient.

He sat holding a completely full bottle of amitriptyline and staring into space, thinking hard about how to confront Raph about this. The pills were for his own good, really. The problem was that that wasn't the sort of reasoning Raph listened to. Heck, Don didn't know what reasoning Raph *ever* listened to. No amount of talking and rationalizing had ever had any effect whatsoever on him. Raph's language had always been extreme violence and raw emotion.

Don closed his eyes as a wry chuckle escaped him. So the only way he could get Raph to take the anti-depressants, it seemed, would be to speak his language.

Raph couldn't fight with a bad leg. Don couldn't engage a wounded warrior.

Don pushed down the temptation to beat his brother into submission.

A chilling thought crept into him. He *could* challenge Raph. Raph wouldn't back down from a fight just because he was wounded. And Raph's wound would ensure Don's victory.

As quickly as the thought had come, Don's entire body rebelled against it. He doubled over, covered his face with his hand, forcing the contents of his stomach to settle.

What a thought, Donatello. What a thought.

He couldn't engage a wounded warrior.

He pulled his hand from his eyes and turned the bottle of amitriptyline in his hand.

Raph knew.

Raph knew they weren't just sleep aids. He knew what they were. Don didn't know how he knew, but he definitely knew. There was no point in lying anymore. Raph might respond to the truth. He might respond if Don stopped pretending to his face.

"You okay?'

Don glanced over to Mike, who sat on the other end of the couch with Raph between them. Mike was looking at him with obvious concern, eye ridges sunk low over his strange blue eyes. "Yeah," he said softly. "Could you…give us a minute?"

Raph tensed immediately.

Mike glanced at the television, sighed, and pushed to his feet. "Just tell me if Charlie dies," he muttered and headed toward his room. Raph moved into his spot on the couch, away from Don.

Don's eyes followed Mike. As soon as his youngest brother's door closed behind him, he wet his lips and took a deep breath. And let it out. And took another one. A glance at Raph told him that Raph was tensing more and more by the second, possibly anticipating what Don was going to say.

It's like Raph's some toaster you're putting back together.

"I guess," he started softly, startling himself, never having meant to say this out loud, "if I saw something wrong with you, I tried to fix it. Same as your wounds. You were depressed. I had to fix it."

He sensed Raph's eyes on him, but didn't return the stare. "These pills—amitriptyline, it's called—I…haven't been entirely honest with you. They are sleep aids, yes. But. In this dosage, it's also…" He swallowed. His hands and feet went very cold. "It's a very common and harmless anti-depressant. Raph, I'm *so* sorry I didn't tell you right away. I thought that if I—"

An explosion of pain and light overwhelmed him, and when his vision cleared, he was staring up at the ceiling. At first disoriented, his brain sorted out that Raph had hit him. Hard. Very hard. Raphael was shouting in fragmented sentences, stopping as soon as he started to stutter.

"You fuckin' b-b-b…you son of a b-b-b-b…D-D…this is *just* the kind of g-g-g…" Raph gave a snarl of frustration and threw himself on top of Don. Don's reactions were suddenly sluggish— *Concussion* , he thought vaguely—and he could only try to block Raph's frenzied, haphazard blows. At this point, Don wasn't sure he had any right to block Raph's punches, although he was fairly certain that he did not want to die. His brain latched on to that thought and he lunged forward, knocking Raph backwards and trying to pin him to the floor. Sparks burst before his eyes.

"It was…for your own good," he argued.

"You d-don't know *fuck* about my own g-good!" yelled Raph, shoving him backwards.

Don seized both of Raph's upper arms in reflex, fists tightening around hard biceps to keep from toppling backwards, to try to keep him down. A second later, Raph's struggling slowed to a stop, but his muscles remained seized in madness, eyes straight ahead. Don gritted his teeth, refusing to give any ground.

"Donatello, STOP!"

Don was seized under the arms and yanked roughly away from Raphael, losing his grip as the sudden movement made his head whirl. He stumbled backward into a hard plastron and nearly blacked out. He clutched for the sofa and directed his fall onto the beaten cushions, breathing heavily as static clouded his vision.

The first thing he was able to see after that was Leo's concerned face. "Are you okay?" his brother asked him softly.

"Mild concussion," Don whispered. His eyes fell to the floor, where Raph lay stiff as a board, jaw clenched, veins in his neck popping out. Splinter knelt by him, brushing a hand over his face and murmuring words in a soothing tone. Mike was halfway down the stairs and running down the rest of them at top speed.

Don's muddled brain could barely put sentences together. He gestured toward Raph. "Flashback?" he murmured.

Leo nodded. "Touching his arms does it," he said gravely.

A pang of guilt seared through Don. This was the last thing he'd wanted. Instead of building his brother up with respect, he had caused him harm.

"STOP, MICHELANGELO!" shouted Splinter, making Don cringe. Mike halted suddenly on the next-to-last step. Splinter did not look angry, only very stern. "You will return to you room," he said more

quietly. "I will care for Raphael, and Leonardo will care for Donatello. No one will be fretting needlessly over Raphael today."

Mike's face morphed from shocked to sheepish. His eyes briefly flickered to Raphael, something close to longing hovering in them, a flood of compassion he was unable to satisfy. Then, after a quiet bow to Splinter, he turned and jogged back up the stairs, not looking back.

Don watched him in startled pity. Splinter did not mean to accuse Mike of needless fretting—Mike had probably done the least fretting of any of them. But needless fretting was the only thing Mike could have done at that point, and Don was slowly coming to understand that that was the sort of thing that was holding Raph back.

Not because he wouldn't take his meds, as medicine couldn't cure everything.

Not because he wouldn't listen to reason, as not everything was rational.

It was because his brothers wanted to help him, and didn't know how.

When Leo opened the door to Raph's room, no one was there.

It took him a moment to think it was strange. It was two in the morning. Raph periodically disappeared around that time. That, of course, was before Raph had been forbidden to leave the lair. Therefore, Raph was most decidedly not supposed to be gone. Leo was simultaneously alarmed and angry.

There was a light on in the kitchen, and Raph wasn't the one using it. Mike was sitting at the kitchen table with a book he was only pretending to read and a mug of tea. The tea clued Leo in—Mike didn't drink tea very often. Most of the time, his hot beverage of choice was hot chocolate. He only drank tea when he wanted to feel

like he was eating something without actually eating something. This happened, more often than not, when he felt like he would throw up anything he ate.

Mike had downed quite a few cups of chamomile tea with honey since that night.

Leo placed a hand flat against the tabletop and leaned against it, staring at his brother. "Where's Raph?" he asked pointedly.

"Topside," Mike said automatically without looking up from his book.

Leo swore and hit the table, eyes swerving to scan the room before turning back to his brother. "He told you this?"

"Not in so many words. He said he was going to visit Leatherhead. He had his sais with him, though, and I'm not stupid."

Leo's voice was very quiet, his skin burning as he tried to control his anger. "And you let him go?"

"I can't make him stay, Leo."

"You can, Michelangelo, if you'd just get over this stupid non-confrontational attitude. You want to be his best friend, be on his side, all that crap, but it's going to destroy him." Leo didn't wait for Mike's reply before walking briskly into his room.

When he came out, his swords were strapped to his back. "I'll be back before long. You stay here in case he comes back." He headed for the door.

Mike shot up from the table, eyes flashing. "You have no—what are you planning to do?"

"Drag him back, if I have to."

"You have no right!"

Leo halted. Turning his head a little toward his brother, he said, "Maybe. And by the same logic, if I had been there, that night, I would've had no right to save him." His eyes smoldered. "Would you have hated me for that, Michelangelo?"

There was only silence in reply.

Leo walked out the door.

Betrayed. First Casey, then Don.

Don't think about that. Concentrate.

It was hard to concentrate.

His name wasn't House. His name was Robert Cole. Raph could see him now, as the gangster entered his apartment building with a hooker on one arm. Raph crawled further down the wall with his shukos and peered into the north window of House's apartment. After a moment, House opened the apartment door and entered, bright with beer and decorated with a laughing woman. She had pink hair that was tied in two knots on the back of her head, bangs that tangled with her fake eyelashes, full scarlet lips, a zebra-print trench coat, a purely ceremonial yellow miniskirt, and thigh-high black boots with high rubber heels.

Raph's eyes scanned the apartment. The carpet was so stained and worn that its original color was anyone's guess. There was a large, widescreen, high-definition television—Raph guessed it was stolen—sitting on the floor opposite two mattresses piled on top of each other. Beer cases littered the area, probably serving as furniture themselves, as the rest of the room was devoid of it. House and his whore collapsed on the mattresses. Raph had been ignoring their talk thus far, but now his ears tuned in.

"Anyone else live here?" asked the prostitute.

House shrugged. "They moved out." He dug around in his pocket. "Fifty, you said?"

They moved out.

They hadn't moved out. Casey had killed one, and Raph had killed the other.

Their names had been James Fraley and Jezimar João Octavio Moura. They had been there that night.

It had taken days to think of Angel as a source of information regarding the Purple Dragons. The information he'd gotten out of her had been invaluable. If it hadn't been for her, he wouldn't have found House's real name.

He crawled up to the rooftop, having no desire to watch House fool around with his whore. He now knew where House lived. He was finished for the night.

Revenge would be soon, and it would be sweet.

But it wouldn't be tonight.

Chapter 6

Splash of water on concrete.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Leo knew Raph would try something like this. He hadn't counted on Mike actually letting him do it, though.

Quiet slapping of feet against damp concrete.

Stupid Raph.

The idiot would get himself killed. He would run into trouble, even go looking for it. He couldn't fight with his bad leg. Yes, the leg had healed well in the past weeks, but it wasn't perfect, and he was out of shape now, his underused muscles had atrophied, and his reflexes had slowed. He couldn't even talk properly, couldn't call for help quickly if he needed it. And the moment some thug tried to pin him down, tried anything that could trigger a flashback…

Raph would be gone.

And Mike had let him go.

Stupid Mike.

Stupid, stupid.

If it hadn't been for them both, Leo wouldn't be running for the nearest manhole, trying to think of where in the city Raph might have run to. Not Casey's this time, for sure. He was probably going for a run over the rooftops. Meaning he could be anywhere in the city.

Breathe, breathe.

The sound of his footfalls and breathing echoed more than it should. He stopped suddenly, holding his breath, listening. The sound of running and rhythmic breathing continued.

Raph.

Leo sank into the shadows, waiting for his brother to appear around the corner. Raph deserved a little surprise. And a lecture. And a beating. Leo was almost tempted to pin him to the floor and send him careening into another flashback.

Almost.

Blur of green, flash of red, flying around the corner, and Leo thrust a heel forward, sending Raph plummeting to the floor by the most juvenile means. Slap of flesh against concrete as Raph caught himself with his hands, and Leo planted his foot firmly on Raph's carapace to hold him there.

"Where were you?" he asked calmly, leaning in to peer at Raphael's face.

Raph growled and swiped Leo's other foot out from under him with an arm. Leo made a desperate scramble to regain his footing and ended up sitting hard on the concrete. A powerful force knocked him backwards, and he was staring up at his brother's furious face.

"You got n-n-no—"

One breathless second later, Leo was straddling Raph's plastron, clasping his hands—he was careful not to touch his arm--and pinning them to the floor. "Right? That seems to be a popular opinion, but I have *every* right not to find you dead on the street somewhere."

"Let—me—go!" growled Raph, straining against his brother, a wild gleam igniting his eyes.

"Where were you?" Leo repeated evenly, forcing his fury into his limbs rather than his voice.

"Out," Raph gave. "Let me g-go."

"Where?"

"None a' your b-b-b-business."

Leo pressed closer. "Where, Raphael?"

"J-just around. Had to g-get out. Let me g-g-g--" Raph cut himself off, clenching his teeth. He was starting to shake.

"And did I tell you *not* to do?" Leo knew he was frightening Raph, and his first thought to that was, *Good.*

"I DON'T FUCKING C-C-C- *CARE!* " Raph bellowed through his teeth.

Leo felt a blow from behind as Raph's knee struck his carapace, sending a jolt of force through him that resounded in his bones. It was a poor place to attack, as the carapace itself had no nerve endings that could send pain signals, but the force of the blow alone could have caused him to lose his focus. He tightened his grip on Raph's hands. "You don't get to do this, Raph," he spat. "I don't have to go through this again with you. If you had any fucking clue as to how close you came to dying, maybe you could see why these orders stand. But you weren't there those nights, and you didn't hear what Don said could happen to you at any moment. You have no. Fucking. Idea."

Leo could see the resistance in his eyes. Raphael glared darkly at him, jaw clenched, pupils constricted, breath hitching in rage. Leo stared. Behind the wiry swirl of pigment in the iris, the infinite shades of brown, the mind worked, as the eyes flickered, darted almost imperceptibly, reacting to a host of emotions, panic, fear, anger, confusion, a deep-buried desire to comply, and beyond them, a

world of memories, many of them shared with Leo, but from a different angle, an altered shade of light, of the coarseness of Splinter's fur, of the beaten softness of the lair's couch, of the smell of chemicals in Don's lab and the slick of oil from the motorcycle, the pitch of Mike's laughter when he didn't mean it, the press of fabric around the eyes, tinted one color, then another. All the things that made him Raphael, plus one thing that Leo did not share, which should never have touched the rest, but now distorted and tainted it until even the fair became foul, even the precious lost its beauty. Those were eyes Leo could not see through anymore, with inconsolable pain behind unbreakable glass, alien pain that should not have been there, and Leo would rather take it himself than see it in his brother's eyes, mingled with the fair and familiar.

Suddenly Raph was in his arms, clasped forcefully to his plastron in spite of vehement struggling, and for just a few seconds, Leo clung to the fair and familiar that was still there, still alive, before it escaped entirely, inevitably as death. Then he was sitting on the concrete floor, alone, as Raphael jogged down the tunnel toward the lair.

Leo sat and watched him run, curling his knees up to his plastron, clasping his shoulders to drive out the cold, and thinking that this would not be the last time he would lose his brother.

No way the phone was ringing this early.

Mike shot out of bed, bleary-eyed and half-blind, and raced down the stairs to the coffee table, where he had left his cell the night before. *Crap crap crap crap crap crap crap crap…* It blared the theme from a classic video game loudly, buzzing in protest against the wood of the table. How long had it been ringing?

"ANSWER THE PHONE!" came a yell from Don's room.

"Trying!" Mike called back. He grabbed at the phone, and it skittered out of his reach and toppled to the floor with a crack. With a curse,

he swiped it up off the floor and opened it. "Hello?" he croaked, blinking his eyes to clear his vision.

"Mikey?" The voice was April's, hoarse and congested. She sounded sleep-deprived, and perhaps as though she had been…

"'Sup, April?" he murmured, a little more awake now, refraining from asking her if she'd been crying.

"Casey's missing."

Mike was completely awake now. "What, did he just disappear?"

"He left a note on the door, I found it last night. I've been trying to call you for hours."

Mike vaguely recalled hearing the phone ringing during the night and ignoring it in favor of sleep. He wanted to kick himself now. "Sorry, I left my cell downstairs. You need me to--What'd the note say?"

"He's going after the last guy who survived that night."

"The last guy who…House?"

"I don't know his name. He's planning to kill him or…or die trying, and I've been looking everywhere for him, all night, and I can't find anything."

"Relax, April," Mike assured her, although panic was rising in his sternum very quickly. "We'll use the tracking and system Don installed in the van on his shell cell. We'll split up and try to get a signal. The radios we used for Cowabunga Carl still work, we'll stay in touch with those. I'll be right there, okay? Don't worry."

"Mikey…"

"Yeah?"

There was a pause.

"Never mind. I'll meet you at Vinny's. I'll pick up some…breakfast before you get there."

"Sure thing. And don't freak, April, he'll be fine."

"Yeah."

Mike headed for his room to get his belt and weapons. "I'll see you in a few, April, I'll need both hands to drive."

"Okay. Seeya."

"Later." Mike closed the cell phone and yanked open his bedroom door. Chucks, belt, he didn't bother grabbing his mask. Jogging back down the stairs, not even looking, he almost didn't see Raphael until he had nearly knocked him down the stairs.

Mike expected some sort of snarl from Raph that would stab at Mike's clumsiness in his haste, but there was only silence. With no time to spare, Mike ducked around his brother and headed for the elevator.

It was only when the elevator doors had closed that Mike wondered how nearby Raph had been when Mike had been on the phone with April. If his brother had overheard…

Raph probably wouldn't care if Casey was missing. He hoped, at least, that Raph hadn't heard him mention House.

He was probably just being paranoid.

Speed. Normally, it was exhilarating. Now, it was frantic, flying over the city streets in the afternoon sun, every inch of the surface of his skin covered in helmet, glove, coat, jeans, shoe that didn't fit. On a normal day, the heat would have been oppressive. Now, it was an infuriating annoyance on a day when everything else was an infuriating annoyance. The heat, the helmet, the traffic, the buzz of

the radio as the reception went in and out, and even April and Mike's voices as they communicated without knowing who was listening.

He had overheard Mike's conversation with April. So Casey was going after House. Casey was an idiot. House was Raph's. If Casey wanted to atone or some bull like that, he could go do something that Don would label as anatomically impossible. That would be appropriate, at least. If Casey got House before Raph did, there would be hell to pay.

No, Casey wouldn't get him. He was Raph's. Raph tightened his grip on the handlebars of the bike. House was his. He wouldn't let Casey have him. House was his.

"I'm not picking up anything, April. Let's backtrack."

"Fine. Do we need to stop for lunch?"

Don't stop for lunch, no, no, no…

"I think I'm okay. You?"

"I couldn't eat anything."

Good.

"Okay, I'll start going back. You go on ahead. If you see anything, tell me."

"Okay."

"We'll find him, April."

"I know."

It had been like this for hours and hours. Mike was in the van, trying to pick up Casey's signal, while April did the same thing in her car with the tracking device Don had installed in her phone. Neither of

them knew there was a third member of the search party. Only, Raph had different intentions.

"Mikey, Leo's calling me."

"Then answer it. You can tell him where I am."

There was a pause. Raph focused on the road ahead, scanning for Casey's truck. Casey preferred walking to driving, but it was worth looking for.

"He's asking if we've seen Raph." April's voice.

"I haven't seem him since this morning. He went up to bed."

"Do you think he heard us talking?"

"He might have."

Raph's fingers griped the handlebars hard enough to cause sharp pains to shoot through his bones. His jaw clenched. This was not good at all.

"He might be following us."

"I haven't seen him all day."

That's because I'm a ninja, you freak! I haven't been hovering right behind you!

There was another pause. "Leo says to keep an eye out for him, he sneaked out last night."

Leo can go to hell.

"Okay."

The sun had just sunk beneath the horizon when there was finally news.

"April, I got him!"

Raph's gut jumped.

"He's closer to you than me. You see him?"

"No…yes!"

"Follow him!"

"I'm on it! Talk to me, tell me how he's moving."

Raph wanted to scream. *WHERE IS HE?*

"He's heading north on Bleeker, and not too fast, I think he's on foot."

Bleeker? *Bleeker?*

"He's passing the intersection with 13th, I think you can catch him."

Raph pulled to the curb and stopped. He was closer to the intersection than either of them. He glanced up and saw it, 13th and Bleeker, right there. And dashing over the crosswalk like a madman was…

Casey Jones, looking like hell.

Raph parked the bike and leapt off it, starting off at a run. It helped to be shorter than most people when one was aiming for concealment, but the helmet blocked much of his field of vision, and for a moment, he lost Casey.

"I'm coming up on 4th, I'm gonna lose him."

"Step on it."

"There's a fucking stupid old geezer in front of me!" April shouted. Raph vaguely recalled Casey mentioning that April had made him stop cussing. That was probably over with now.

Another pause. "I think you're okay, April. He's stopped."

"Stopped?"

"Yeah, he hasn't moved in about a minute."

"What do you think…?"

House wasn't alone. Casey watched as he supervised a group of six teenagers who were spray-painting the wall of the building he stood upon. All seven of them had guns. Now, Casey had dealt with larger groups than this. Most of the time, he would take them by surprise, taking down as many as he could while they were still too shocked to even think about their guns.

Why hadn't he done that that night?

It was bizarre, standing up here, halfway trying to come up with a plan that would get him killed. Consciously. There had been a time when his reckless vigilantism had come from a subconscious death wish. But actively thinking about it was strange.

Either way, death wasn't the main goal. Not his, anyway. If he survived this, he didn't expect a hero's welcome back at the lair, or in the arms of April. In fact, she would probably be even angrier at him for risking his life. Well, if she cared anymore.

No, Casey Jones was doing this for purely selfish reasons. So he could have some degree of peace with himself. So that he would have done *something* right in all this.

He was a piece of work.

No battle cries this time. Just death. He yanked his hockey stick from its sheathe. *Ain't puttin' you away 'til you've killed again, my friend.* It felt good to think that. Like he was Lancelot or something.

Then, quietly, he leapt from the building.

The last time he'd fallen free like this was that night. Stupid. He'd jumped from the second-story window of a hospital, throwing an ice chest with a kidney down before him. When he'd reached the bottom, gore was spattered everywhere. The kidney was gone. After that, he'd had no choice but to go after Raph himself.

Like he should have done before.

His hands caught the railing of a fire escape halfway down to stop his fall, then released it. He handed hard on his feet and immediately swung his stick at the feet of the man he'd landed in front of. The gangster was knocked to the ground, and the familiar burn of blinding rage touched Casey's shoulders as he saw the fat, pasty face.

This man had blackmailed him.

This man had been a part of the brutal gang-rape that had left his best friend near death.

This man had gotten away with it.

The cry of rage started low, guttural, deep in Casey's throat, then rose to an animal roar, drowning out the coherence of the surrounding world, spreading speckles of red over his eyes to cover his field of vision. He barely knew what he was doing—only that he had taken out the teenagers quickly and was now attacking House over and over, driving him backwards into the wall, again, again, again.

Explosion of pain, and he was on the ground, but springing up again, attacking with renewed force. Every blow, instead of cleansing him, made him angrier, fed his rage like a temperamental child swiping more sweets. His blood sang, he could hear it, hot skin, cold breath, dry lips, tunnel vision, nothing but him and the gangster, him and his redemption.

Kill me! Casey almost demanded. *If you won't fucking die, kill me!*

Then he was aware that there was no House, only a solid wall. He blinked, eyes clearing slowly. A few seconds, and he realized he had limbs again, hands and feet, but grew unaware of them once more when his gaze was drawn downward.

House was slumped against the wall, trails of blood blazing down his face from his mouth, nose, and forehead, dark crimson against dead white. He was breathing shallowly, alive, yet to be finished. Casey switched his hockey stick for a baseball bat, rested the end gently against House's throat, and drew back.

A dull thunk of metal against wood, and Casey felt the bat jerk in his hands. He pulled it down and stared at where a shuriken was stuck in the wood. His eyes were irresistibly drawn to the right, muscles tense, prepared for the worst.

Raphael.

It was the worst.

Raph stood still as stone, silent, eyes darker than the street around them, piercing Casey like needles. Both of his feet were planted firmly apart, fists at his sides, chin tilted slightly downward, and he stood on the balls of his feet. This struck Casey as strange—it was the stance Raph took when he was cautious, apprehensive, not aggressive. Faint hope tingled in his chest, and he lowered the bat to the ground.

"Raph," he said softly.

Suddenly, the turtle's face darkened more, and he raised his fists, settling into a fighting stance, one foot in front of the other, balanced, poised like a figure of steel. Casey could feel his heartbeat throughout his body, and he didn't know how his hands and feet had gotten so cold. He was not shivering. He *was not shivering* . It was just cold outside.

He clenched his jaw. "You wanna fight me, Raphie?"

Raph exploded in a roar and lunged for him. Casey dropped the bat an instant before Raph slammed into him and carried him to the ground. A blinded second later, pain, pain, pain, as a fist slammed into his face, again, again. He fought the instinct telling him to block, to dodge, to fight back, to save himself. With every punch, Casey's world became more normal. This was Raph's time. Raph deserved this, and so did Casey.

Fist in jaw, chin, nose, cheek, cheek, jaw, jaw, jaw, temple, sparks, spots, pain, heat, lip, jaw, jaw, teeth, taste of blood, pain, penance, pain, *pause* .

Keep going.

Pause.

What are you doing, you fool? Get it out. Let it out. Punish me. Make everything the way it's supposed to be again.

Suddenly, Raph's weight left Casey's chest, air, breath. The sharp pain of before was being replaced by a slow, throbbing, more intense pain. He was in pain, but he could move. He sat up slowly, forcing his eyes to focus. Raph stood in front of House's collapsed figure, that dark look on his face again, but mixed with apprehension, slow-burning anger, and frustration.

He wanted Casey to fight back.

"Not gonna happen, bro," Casey said softly, and immediately recognized his mistake. No way he had the right to call Raph by that name now. "I ain't gonna fightcha."

Raph sank back into the shadows, and the only thing visible about him was the slight glimmer of his eyes.

"Casey?"

Casey's head snapped toward the end of the alley, where April was silhouetted against the light of the street. He pushed himself to his feet, unsure now of what to do. He hadn't expected her to come after him, let alone find him. Come to think of it, this was probably some freak coincidence. She hadn't known he was there. Strangers on the street, that sort of thing.

April broke into a run, clattering down the alley in her walking boots and throwing her arms around him, nearly knocking him over. Suddenly she slapped him, and he gave an involuntary grunt of pain.

"Fucking idiot," she snarled, slamming her little fist against his chest with a thump. "You stupid—" slap "—idiot—" slap "—bastard!" Another slap, and Casey's whole face ached more than he'd thought possible. "How *dare* you run out like that and leave some horrible note making me think you're going to die—you—how *dare* you?" She threw her arms around his neck and buried her face in his chest.

Bewildered, he held her as she continued to ramble against his chest. "I'm fine," he said lamely.

"You have no idea what I've been going through today, Mike and I were looking everywhere and I was afraid you were dead…"

"I'm sorry, baby," he said softly, and blinked as he realized he was beginning to mean it.

"How the *hell* could you throw your life away like that, do I mean *nothing* anymore?"

She went quiet. Casey rested his right cheekbone—the one that wasn't bruised—against her hair. When her body trembled a little, he realized she was crying. "I'm sorry," he said again. "I'm okay," he added, rubbing her back, the numbness of the past twenty-four hours slowly coming loose. *She still loves me.*

He wanted to cry, too.

She pulled away a little. "No, I'm sorry," she said. "I've been spending every night avoiding you, and you needed me, I'm so sorry Casey, this is my fault—"

"No, baby," he murmured, drawing her back into his arms. "It's not your fault, I screwed—"

"Don't you dare say that." She pulled away again and furiously wiped the tears from her face with a pale hand. "I know you messed up, everyone does, Casey, and you're still worth it to me. Okay?" Her eyes, firm, strong, bold, met his. There were those amazing green gems, deep as the shades of a forest, all his, for no reason but the one she could see, and beneath them, those Nicole Kidman lips, which he made his once more with a kiss.

When she pulled away, she whispered, "I love you."

"Love you, too," he murmured back.

Staring into his face, she frowned a little and touched his cheek. "What happened to you?"

Raph.

Casey turned suddenly, eyes darting about the alleyway. The forms of six teenagers lay motionless still. No Raph. No House.

No Raph. No House.

No Raph! No House!

Raph had gone, and taken House with him.

"Shit," hissed Casey.

Chapter 7

"Calm yourself, Leonardo," Splinter said softly as he sat on the dojo floor in the Lotus position, eyes closed. By all appearances, this was a normal day for the ninja master. His breathing was slow and even, and he had not spoken in at least a quarter of an hour, at which time he had suggested that Leo meditate with him. He had not moved, still as a tree on a windless evening, as a porcelain statue, light as air, calm as water.

Leo rounded on him. "How can you just *sit* there?" he snarled, and immediately regretted it.

Splinter gave him a dark look without even opening his eyes fully.

Deep breath. " *Sumimasen deshita ka* , Sensei," Leo apologized softly, bowing low, closing his eyes as he did so. Light as air, calm as water.

" *Iie* , Leonardo," murmured Splinter. He closed his eyes and once more resumed meditation.

It was a façade. Splinter was meditating because he had no other way to stay calm, now that his son had disappeared. Again. And no one knew where he was. Leo gritted his teeth. His eyes slid shut, and he sank to his knees before his master.

"Sensei?"

Splinter's eyes opened again. "Yes, my son?"

"I ask permission to go out and look for Raphael." Splinter's responses to this question, repeated over the course of the day, had all been to the negative—but it was late now, and there had been no word from Raphael.

There was a moment of hesitation on Splinter's part, and his eyes flickered, seeming to search through the possibilities of any outcome he allowed. "Ah… the answer is not as easy as I wish," he said softly. "Raphael…is not like you. You trust the guidance of those who have come before you, and learn from it, and remain true to it. He is not satisfied with the experience of the wise, or the knowledge of the ages, until he can prove it for himself. To force it upon him is to drive him away from it, and to cause him to lose himself further. You walk a lighted path, Leonardo, while he finds his own way by feeling through the dark. This is what makes him strong—the bird who fought his way out of the egg will survive, while the one whose egg was broken for him will perish. Your strength is different—you test what you know, but you have not openly rebelled. His strength causes him to go astray, and that must be allowed when it can be, while we remain ready to show him his true path if he should seek guidance. He will learn, in time, that living is not an individual effort. But he must learn that on his own, or he will not learn it at all. *Wakatta ne?* Do you understand what I am saying, my son?"

Donatello burst into the dojo in a flurry of barely controlled panic, carrying his cell phone. "I just spoke to April," he rushed. "They saw Raph."

Leo bolted to his feet, but not as quickly as his sensei. "Where?" demanded Splinter, eyes making sparks.

"A few miles from here. They say Casey saw him"—

"They?" interrupted Leo.

"Casey's with her." Don spoke the words with slight but noticeable distaste. "He was out looking for House and Raph showed up as soon as he found him. He beat the hell out of Casey before April showed up, and then he disappeared."

The hesitant relief Leo had felt initially was now gone. He hissed in frustration. "Did they see where he went?"

Don's panic, as though he had been given time to absorb what he had heard, was giving way to an anger than matched his brother's. "No sign of him. Mike was with April, looking for Casey. He's coming back. He'll probably know more."

"Why did you hang up?" Leo demanded, infuriated. Splinter remained silent, absorbing every word and mannerism of his brightest son.

"She told me everything she knew, and she had to drive," Don snapped as though irritated that Leo was blaming him. "Leo, she said that when Raph disappeared, so did House."

That caused dead silence in the room. Splinter had a dark look on his face, and his eyes smoldered. "And what does Miss O'Neil make of this?"

"House was unconscious. She thinks…she thinks Raph killed him."

"Did Raph say anything?" asked Leo.

"She didn't say."

"Call her back."

Don flipped his phone open and dialed April's number. Leo glanced at his sensei, who appeared thoughtful, brows low over his fathomless dark eyes. After a moment of silence, Splinter said, "Tell me what you are thinking, Leonardo."

There was no separation of training from real life. "I think," Leo said slowly, "that April might be right. Raph also could have simply captured House, but I don't know why he would keep him alive when he was one of the ones who…" Leo didn't finish the sentence. "And I would hate to think—but have to consider the possibility—that Raph may have left, and House may have awakened and followed him…or that he awoke and overpowered Raph."

"No answer," Don said softly, closing the phone. "She usually doesn't when she's driving."

Splinter nodded. "You two will join me in searching the city for your brother. When Michelangelo returns, he will wait here for Raphael and let us know if he returns. But we haven't a moment to lose. Where did Miss O'Neil say they saw Raphael?"

"Just off 13th and Bleeker."

"Then we will start there. Remember, your brother is recovering from a serious injury, and can barely speak. We must find him quickly."

Raph had prepared this spot in the sewer days ago. He'd selected a room with a large, strong pillar of brick and brought in a coil of strong rope and a pair of handcuffs. He'd even set a chair in the room for himself. Everything had been thought of in advance.

House was still unconscious, on his knees, tied to the brick pillar, his cuffed hands tied to his ankles. It was truly an uncomfortable position. His arms and legs were probably already asleep. He stirred a little, eyelids flickering. Raph had had to hit him a few times on the way here to keep him from awakening. Now, all was set. Everything was ready.

Everything except Raphael.

Raphael had hunkered down in a dark corner, forcing himself to stare at his captive as though if he stared long enough, his stomach would stop churning, his hands would stop shaking, his heart would stop pounding. House would awaken any minute, and he couldn't see Raph like this. If Raph was going to do this, to make his enemy fear him, he had to maintain control. If House wasn't afraid of him, no amount of torture would extract justice—he would always know that he had some sort of effect on Raph.

House was stirring, and Raph's breath wasn't getting any slower, his heartbeat sped up, and his eyes widened fractionally. He hadn't planned for this. He hadn't known his body would reject this plan as soon as it was put into action. All his life, he had been trained to make his body obey him, but at the same time, give it what it wanted.

So he closed his eyes and abandoned himself to sheer panic for three breaths. When his eyes opened, he was calm.

The gangster's eyelids flitted open, pale eyes dim in the shadows, the room lit only by two camping lanterns. When House's eyes focused on Raphael, they widened a little and glanced to the side. Raph stood, staring at the gangster and refusing to shiver. This time, he was in control. This time, House was going to suffer.

"Remember me?" he asked calmly.

House didn't reply.

Raph seized forward, snatching the gangster's jaw and forcing him to look him in the eye. "I said, 'Do you remember me?'" he snarled.

"No you didn't," mumbled House through clenched teeth. "You said, 'Remember me?'"

Raph bashed his head against the pillar, forcing a grunt of pain from his captive. "Answer the question."

"'Course I remember you," muttered House, squinting as though through a haze of pain. "You're the bitch."

A screen of red passed over Raph's eyes, and when it passed, House was listing to one side, grimacing in pain. Raph's right hand remained balled into a fist, and felt like he'd been punching someone repeatedly… which he probably had. "My name," he hissed, "is Raphael, and by the end of the night, you'll *know* why you shouldn't a' messed with me."

"Sounds like a nice line, hero," House said softly, straightening, eyes half-lidded and glittering. "Believe me, you're nothing special. *Our* lesson was to teach *you* not to mess with *us* . Slow learner."

Burn of rage, and Raph unleashed another series of blows on House's hated face, that face, flabby and smug, it should have felt better than it did to hurt it, to make it pay for that smugness. He seized House's bare scalp and shoved his head against the pillar roughly. "In my life," he said hotly, "I've fought and won against guys you've kissed the feet of. I've beat freaks that woulda made you shit yourself ta look at 'em. What the *fuck* makes you think you're any kind of a problem for *me* ?"

"For one, none a' those guys rammed a C-cell up your ass," House said with an amused note.

" *Fuck* that's brave," snarled Raph, shoving House's head harder against the pillar. "Shoot a guy in the leg and beat 'im up, and bleed 'im out, and that makes you so strong?"

"You tied me up," said House through his teeth, eyes calm but the veins in his neck standing out. "You're beatin' the shit outta me. That make you stronger?"

Raph snorted. "Fucking idiot," he sneered. "This ain't about me provin' I'm stronger than you. This is about you gettin' what you deserve." He shoved his fist into House's gut, right beneath his rib cage, where his stomach was. House's eyes popped and bile streamed from his mouth to drip down his chin. Raph's stomach turned.

House spat. "That all you got, little whore?"

Dirty little whore likes it!

Raph swallowed the burn of rage. "Got more than you. You just got names."

"Why haven't you killed me yet?" House asked with a note of nonchalance.

"Should be obvious." Raph tried to match House's flippant attitude. He turned away, picking up the chair and flipping it so the back faced House. "I don't wanna. I wanna hurt you."

"'Cause we hurt you, right? 'Cause we really gotcha that time. Made you think. Made you take us seriously. Made you hurt. Gave you nightmares."

With a hiss, Raph struck out again, hit him three, four, five, six times before stopping himself. He didn't want House unconscious again. He wanted him to be awake and suffering.

The beating didn't seem to phase House this time. He licked his lips as Raph drew away and turned to sit down. "We made 'l'sting 'mpression, I c'n tell," he slurred, beaten mouth working less. "It was good f'r me. Wuz it… good for you?"

The blow this earned him knocked out a tooth and loosened a few more. Raph could feel them give, but felt no satisfaction from it. As House spat his mouth free of the blood, Raph casually swung a leg over the chair and sat on it backwards, as relaxed as possible, folding his arms over the back. He immediately became aware of how uncomfortable he was sitting like this, especially in front of House, but if he shifted his position, he would give away his discomfort. If House knew he had power over the way Raph sat, it would be the end of Raph's control over the situation.

House's eyes grazed Raph up and down. "You spreadin' f'r more?"

The chair flew sideways and clattered to the floor. Raph gave a cry of rage and punched House again, and again, and again. With every blow, he only got angrier, only loathed the contact with his victim even more. House's skin, clammy and cold like white dough, was becoming more repulsive, and worse, House's laughing eyes, and worst of all, though helpless and hidden behind his back, House's

powerful hands. Knowing they were there, attached to him, was what made Raphael stop pummeling his captive and stumble backwards, too disgusted and horrified to be near them, those hands that had crushed his flesh and muscle against his bones, holding him, pinning him, helpless and weak and hideously pathetic…

Swallow .

What a sight he must have been.

House's eyes had seen it, had seen him weaker than he had ever been, had seen secrets no one had ever been allowed to touch, and knew that, and used it against him still.

House's mouth was smiling. Raph wanted to cut that smile in half, to beat it off his face, but he couldn't stand to touch House's skin again, to feel it scrape over his knuckles as he struck and know that the physical pain he caused him was temporary. House knew that, too. House knew that, regardless of who was tied up, regardless of who was beating who, House had control now. House's mouth could make him lose his temper. House's voice could remind him of his weakness. And on some level, Raphael feared that House's arms would break his bonds and House's hands would seize Raphael and do it all over again.

Raph hated looking at him. He could beat him all he wanted and it wouldn't do a thing for him, any more than it would do a thing to House. Nothing Raph could do to House would change what had happened. Nothing Raph could do to House would be as bad as what House had done, and for that, House had the upper hand.

He didn't have to say a word. House still had control, and was continuing what he had helped start almost a month before.

He couldn't look at House's smile anymore. His stomach burned, and his knees felt weak, and he knew he was going to vomit. House couldn't see that. House already knew to what level he had reduced Raph. He didn't need to get any more satisfaction from it.

Raph turned and walked quickly from the room, faster than he meant to but slower than he wanted to, trying not to let it show, trying to stay in control, and as soon as he was out of earshot he doubled over and puked, his body seized with powerful spasms and waves of nausea. Coughing, he sank to his knees, waiting for the spasms to pass, for his control to resume. He didn't think it ever would.

You're the bitch.

No. No.

No, I'm not.

He had to get home. He had to get away from House.

He stumbled to his feet and started to run, leaving House behind. He would decide later what to do with his captive, but right now, he couldn't look at him, couldn't touch him, couldn't hear him speaking what he knew was true.

I'm not.

Chapter 8

It makes a difference

That I'm feeling this way

With plenty to think about

And so little to say

Except for this confession

That is poised on my lips

I'm not letting go of God

I'm just losing my grip…

What is a love

If the love's not my own

This is not my home

This is lonely

But never alone.

Over the Rhine, "When I Go."

"I told him the truth. Lying to him wasn't helping."

"Seems like the truth made things worse."

"I was out of options." Donatello stopped talking and gritted his teeth as he hurtled over an alley between two rooftops.

As soon as he landed, and Leonardo landed behind him, Splinter, several yards in front of them, froze. "Stop," he said suddenly, holding out a hand behind him. Don obeyed, catching himself in mid-pace and straightening to catch his breath.

Leo walked up behind him. "I'm sorry, Don, I'm—"

"You're frustrated with Raph and need to argue with someone while he's not here. I know that. Argue aw—" Don was interrupted when his cell phone rang abruptly. He glanced up at Splinter, who was looking at him expectantly.

He knew that was going to happen.

Don swiped the phone from his belt and answered it. "Yeah?"

"Raph's back." The voice was Mike's.

Don's eye ridges lowered in concern. "Is he okay?"

There was a pause. "I think you should come back."

Don's heart skipped a beat. "Is he hurt?"

"I don't think so, but he's…please come back." The last three words were pleading.

Don nodded. "We'll be there in a second, Mikey, just hang on."

"Raph?" Leo cracked Raphael's door open and peered inside. The lights were off—there was nothing but a sliver of silver light coming in through the door Leo held open, illuminating a floor littered with small items and furniture. He opened the door wider and dodged a book that sailed in his direction. "Raph?"

At last the sliver of light, darting across the floor, fell on Raphael, sitting crosslegged on the floor, hunched over, head bowed, arms folded and pressed against his plastron. He made a small sound as though trying to speak, then stopped.

Leo took two slow steps through the door. "What happened?"

"G-g-g-" said Raph. He almost sounded like he was choking.

Leo paused, then continued forward. "Are you hurt?"

Raph made a sharp, truncated exhale, but said nothing.

"Raph, you have to talk to me." Step. Step. "If we don't—"

Suddenly, Raph lashed out at his legs, forcing Leo to take a few steps backwards. After a tense moment, Raph resumed his previous position and was silent.

Leo had come so close—surely he could get close enough to touch Raph. He wasn't sure what he would do then. Maybe wrap his brother in his arms while Raph cried his heart out—unlikely, he knew. It was the image that sprang to mind, though, a picture-perfect movie moment. Realistically, Raph probably wouldn't let him get that close.

"Leo." Mike stood in the doorway, beckoning to him. Leo followed, and the door was closed behind them.

In the kitchen, Mike poured a glass of soda. "He's been like this since he came back," he said softly. "He couldn't even talk. He kept trying to yell at me when I asked him questions, I could see it in his face, like he was gonna…" He paused, then sighed. "Pop, or something. But he couldn't talk. Not like, mute. More like, really bad stutter. Really bad, Leo, something happened." He fell silent.

Leo started to make tea. It was the only thing he could think of doing until he thought of what to say. Fill kettle with water. Place on stove. Turn on stove. Hands working, eyes watching, not quite seeing. Something had happened to Raph, that was definite. There was no doubt in Leo's mind that House was a part of it. He plucked a mug from a cabinet and a jar of loose leaf Tanganda tea he'd obtained while traveling through Zimbabwe.

"Raph left Casey and April. House disappeared as well. Either Raph took House with him, or House woke up and followed Raph." He glanced back at Mike to see if he was following. Mike's eyes were fastened to him. Leo continued. "Either way, House…probably overpowered and attacked Raph. Whatever he did then, or almost did…I don't want to think about. Whatever it was…probably forced Raph to kill him. What do you think?"

Mike was silent for several seconds, then, "I shouldn'ta let him go."

Leo turned to face him fully, eyes narrowing. "What?"

"Last night, when he went out. You were right, I was so stupid—"

"Mikey," Leo sighed softly, coming over to the table and sinking into a chair. "You…I don't know what to say." He rested his elbows against the table and covered his eyes with his hands. "He didn't get hurt last night, he got hurt tonight. At least you didn't learn this from your own mistakes."

"I knew he heard my conversation with April, I shoulda known he'd —"

"You couldn't have known. I wouldn't think Raph would be interested in trying to find Casey..." He glanced up at Mike, then lowered his hands. "What?"

Mike had frowned. His eyes met Leo's. "April didn't think you'd be interested, either. Or Don. 'S why she called me."

Leo sighed and slid his eyes closed. "Mikey…"

"All I'm sayin' is you shouldn't treat Casey like he's the one that did it."

A sharp, bitter laugh escaped Leo. "Trust me, Mikey. If Casey was the one who did it, I would have killed him by now."

It was the endless scene of watching a movie with Mike, the scene he couldn't seem to escape. He excused himself to go to the bathroom, unusual calm and resolution in his gut. He was going to do this.

He locked the bathroom door behind him.

Immediately his eyes searched for his resources. Soap. Toxic. A glass. He filled the glass and inserted the bar of soap. Toothpaste. A squirt went into the glass. He sifted through the medicine cabinet, where there was a variety of pills, from the mundane to the potent. He took down a bottle of the most powerful painkillers they had and popped it open. One pill went down, then another, and eventually the bottle was empty. Nothing yet. He seized another bottle.

The water in the glass was turning cloudy, and he removed the bar of soap, stirred the mixture with a finger and drank it down. It tasted bitter and dry. Mouthwash, cough syrup, he started to swallow both. When they were gone, he reached for a box of decongestants and took the five that were left. Still nothing.

Frustrated, he filled the glass of water again and drank its contents, hoping to speed the medicine along. When that wasn't immediately effective, he growled and punched the mirror. It shattered, shifting from one to thousands of images of himself, pathetic, insane, helpless and unable even to do this.

The shower curtain. It was plastic. He seized it in both hands, pressed it against his face, and inhaled. Idiot. It only worked as long as he held his breath. The rod. He broke down the rod holding the shower curtain and snapped it into a manageable length, then started ramming the sharp edge against his face. No, easier access to the brain through the mouth. He stabbed with it at his soft palate, in the back of his throat. It would not penetrate.

With a cry of rage, he flung the bar across the room and threw himself at the mirror, plucking the shards of glass up and crushing them in his hands until they lay in dime-sized pieces. One by one, he

swallowed them, just like the pills, their sharp edges torturing his throat as they went down, cold bolts of fire in his esophagus, and he still did not bleed enough.

Blood.

He scraped his hands against the rough brick of the wall, attacking the knuckles, the webs between his fingers, any place where the skin was relatively delicate. It peeled the outer layer of his skin, but did not access blood.

Blood. Punishment.

Hands curled into fists, and Raphael was punching the walls, hard, harder, and blood began to fleck the walls before it sprayed his face, wearing his hands down to the bones. Blindly he struck, and continued to strike, the sounds of his blows lessening until there was no noise, no sight, nothing but the slick warmth of blood, his blood, everywhere, running down his wrists and dripping off his elbows.

Suddenly his hands froze on the wall, bracing him, and he rammed his head against the brick. There was a whirl of dizziness, but no sparks, no brain damage. His head hit the wall again, again, again, until the blood ran. The wall was a sheet of crimson, dark, uniform, perfect.

Blood. Punishment. Death.

Not enough punishment.

No death at all.

He grabbed a nail clipper from the cabinet and used the sharp nail file to dig into his left wrist, picking away bits of flesh, savagely delving for the living artery, pulling it out of his arm, but unable to sever it. The pills still weren't working, he wasn't dying fast enough, nothing was happening. He tried to shove the nail clipper back into

the cabinet, but it stuck to his hand when he pulled away. Again he tried, with the same result, over and over and over, and *nothing.*

He screamed, emptying his lungs of frustration and futility, and there was still more, so much more.

When he woke up in bed, he was choking on nothing.

He sat up suddenly, eyes wide and wild, gasping for breath, trying desperately to grasp what was real and what had been dreamt. Wrist intact. Throat hurt a little, probably from trying to scream. Not like he had been swallowing glass. He felt the ghosts of bruises, but they were only fading memories from the dream. Nothing had been real.

It had been so real.

Something small and distant in his mind said, *I am so fucked up.*

Raph tore away his covers and rolled out of bed, shivering as his feet touched the floor. He padded down the stairs and into the dojo as though led there. It was dark. There were night lights here and there throughout the lair—a necessity for a home in total darkness—but their dim light only made the darkness more oppressive.

This wasn't his home.

The weapons rack glinted.

If I was going to, how would I do it?

Raph was drawn to the weapons rack, shivering harder as it came closer. He halted before it, staring at its contents. Staves of various sizes, bladed weapons curved and straight, swords and spears, nunchaku and ninjaken, and all of them deadly in their own way. Some crushed, some stabbed, some sliced, some cut. Crushing wasn't practical. One of the other three would work. He examined the bladed weapons. Leo's swords were too long and clumsy. The shorter daggers would be suitably painful and easier to use.

The more he looked, the more he was attracted to his own sais. They had seemed a truer friend of late than any he'd had before. He plucked one from the rack and stared at it. On inspiration, he held the point to his eye, leveling the weapon with the ground. Through the eye, into the brain. Painful but efficient. He could die on his own sai, the cold metal sealing his brain and bringing him silence at last. They had been good to him. Very good to him.

A flash of cold perspective, and suddenly it struck him that he was staring down the shaft of his sai, able to destroy his own life with the slightest motion. The weapon clattered to the floor, and he stepped away from it, shivering harder than before. His lungs filled with ice, and he couldn't breathe, his brain exploding with fireworks flashing hot and cold.

I am so fucked up.

But a part of him was still beckoned by the sai—more of him than he wanted.

He wouldn't allow that part to kill him. Not yet.

He couldn't go back to bed. It would find him there, too, in that place where his nightmares took hold.

What could he do?

He could talk to someone. That idea struck a joyous chord in him. Not one of his brothers. He couldn't talk to them anyway.

Splinter opened his bedroom door to a knock moments later, finding before him his strong son, shivering with an unnamed fever and barely able to speak.

Raph sat on one of his father's tatami mats and sipped hot tea. "A lot of b-bad things've happened," he said softly when he found his voice. "I dunno. It jus'…seems like I've b-been through worse."

Splinter watched Raph over his own cup of tea. "Have you, my son?"

Raphael's mind traced over its collection of memories he would rather lose.

A home in shambles.

" *Nice blades. Tell me who gave them to you."*

Shattered glass, broken window, broken body.

" *I don't know what it is about you, little fella, but it tastes good to the last drop!"*

No letters, no phone calls, he may as well be dead.

" *Hey House, gimme your flashlight."*

Pain like he'd never known in a place he never thought he'd know it.

" *He likes it! Dirty little whore likes it!"*

Tang of blood and filth.

" *Swallow."*

I have to get out of this. Where is Casey?

"I d-dunno."

But probably not.

"I dunno, it just…seems like there should b-be something."

Splinter set his tea down. "That is not relevant, Raphael. The way you are reacting—I am told it is common and natural."

"I have these…c-crazy dreams, Father," Raph said softly, his stuttering lessening as the tea calmed him. "Not just about…that.

Like, dreams where I'm…d-doing things. T-to myself." His mouth was on autopilot even as his mind set off warning flags.

Splinter paused. "What things?"

"Like…I d-dunno, it's c-c-c—" He stopped, hands tightening around his mug of tea.

After a moment, the old rat nodded. "You would be wise to tell me, my son. Often, such dreams have meaning."

Raph gave a sputtering laugh. "I know what these dreams mean."

"And what do they mean, Raphael?"

Raph pressed his lips together. If he told, Splinter would think he was suicidal. Which he…almost was. He wasn't planning to kill himself. He just had dreams about it. Even when he was awake. Nevertheless, he didn't want Splinter setting Leo on him to watch over his every move. Leo would love another reason his little brother couldn't do without him. On the other hand, perhaps he could use someone around to make sure he didn't…Raph's breath quickened.

Splinter reached out and pressed a hand to Raph's cheek. "You need rest, my son," he said softly.

Raph shook his head. "I don't think I can." He thought of his bed, where his nightmares assaulted him. He couldn't sleep there.

The old rat's ears twitched. He rose to his feet slowly and hobbled to one of his small wooden chests. He opened it and took out a small pouch. "This is an herb that will help you sleep unplagued by dreams." When he was kneeling in front of Raph again, he plucked a few leaves from the pouch and held them over Raph's steaming teacup. "Do you wish it, Raphael?"

There was a moment of hesitation. Raph's mind flashed back to Don's betrayal. But this was different. This was Splinter, and a few

hours without nightmares, a few hours of pure sleep would be…He nodded.

Splinter dropped the leaves into the cup. "Wait for a few minutes, then drink the entire cup," he said softly. "Now, come with me to the television. I wish to watch stories." The sensei pushed himself to his feet. Raph did the same, careful not to spill any tea.

When they arrived in the living room, Splinter plucked the remote from the couch's armrest and turned the television on. He sank into the rocking chair by the couch and began to flip through the channels. Raph set the tea on the coffee table and sat on the couch. As Splinter settled onto the Animal Planet channel, Raph drained his teacup and set it back down, reaching for the blanket hanging over the back of the couch. He wrapped himself in it and lay down, resting his head on the armrest nearest Splinter, eyes falling upon the television screen like slow-descending leaves. After a few minutes his vision began to blur, and he closed his eyes.

He fell asleep to the sound of the television on low volume and the creaking of the rocking chair. And for the first time in weeks, he did not dream.

Chapter 9

Leo woke earlier than usual, staring at the ceiling and wondering why he was awake. He rolled over and stared at the clock. It was 4:21, set to go off at five. He liked to get up at least fifteen minutes before everyone else and meditate. Lately, it had turned into an hour. He lay still, breathing deeply and wondering if he should try to go back to sleep. He wasn't tired. He may as well get up and make use of himself.

Splinter was downstairs, sitting in the rocking chair in front of the television, watching some program or another with the volume turned down low. Beside him, slumbering peacefully on the couch, was Raphael. Leo crept down the stairs, careful not to wake his brother during what looked to be the one healing sleep he'd had since the attack. As he reached the bottom of the steps, he padded toward Splinter's rocking chair. Splinter's eyes flickered up from the television to look at him in restrained relief. Leo halted and bowed.

"Come with me, Leonardo." the old rat whispered, slowly rising from the rocking chair. "I must speak to you. But we must not wake Raphael."

Leo nodded and followed his sensei to the kitchen. Splinter wasted no time in beginning to prepare tea for himself and his son. "Raphael's spirit wanes," he murmured as he poured the loose leaves into the tea kettle and placed it on the stove. The dial clicked as the old rat turned it to "hot." "I can feel it, and I believe you can as well. He has spoken to me long, and said many things that frighten me."

Splinter set two teacups on the counter and looked Leo in the eye. "He tells me of dreams in which he does terrible things to himself, but will not say what things they were. I told him such dreams may have meaning, and he said that he already knew their meaning. Leonardo, your brother is in such pain." Splinter's ears sank,

flattening slightly against his head. "Such pain that I cannot fathom the depths, try as I may to ease it even a little. Such pain is wearying, and so terrible that one would do anything to be rid of it. Even die."

Leo's eyes widened, and his heart crashed against his sternum.

"You and your brothers must watch him very closely. Do not make it look as though you are watching him, but watch him nonetheless. He must not be allowed to bring about this end."

"Hai, sensei— *wakarimashita* ," Leo said under his breath. He glanced over his shoulder, into the living room, at Raphael, who had not stirred. Raph's breathing was slow and deep. He was still asleep. "Hai," he repeated. "I won't let him hurt himself."

"You must tell your brothers," Splinter continued. "You will lead practice this morning while I remain with Raphael. Tell Donatello and Michelangelo what I have told you. Tell them in secret. If Raphael knows what you are doing, he will resist."

Leo nodded. "Hai, sensei."

Splinter gently touched Leo's shoulder. "You are dismissed, Leonardo."

Leo began to turn away, but halted when Splinter's grip tightened on his shoulder. He froze, searching his father's face. Splinter's gaze had gone vacant—he had probably held on to his son on impulse. After a moment, his eyes flickered to Leo.

Leonardo leaned forward and wrapped his father in an embrace. Splinter held him tightly, running a hand up and down his carapace.

"I won't let him, Master."

" *Hai—ohayou, minna-san* ."

" *Ohayou gozaimasu, o-nii-san* ." The greeting was muttered quickly by Donatello and Michelangelo as each gave a quick, truncated bow. *Good morning, brother.*

" *Kyou wa, ore wa kangaete ageru* ." *Today, I'm teaching.* "But, before we begin…" Leo lowered his voice. "Raph's on suicide watch."

Mike's eyes widened. Don didn't look surprised.

" *Wakattajyanai yo* ?" Leo asked softly. *Don't you understand me?*

"Uh, no, Leo, I think it's safe to say the memo…uh, got lost in the interim," sputtered Mike. "What the hell did he do?"

"Splinter got a good idea from something he said last night—he was seriously contemplating suicide."

"That's quite common," Don said quietly. "About a third of rape victims"—

"Raph's not a third of rape victims!" hissed Mike. "He thinks it's stupid to kill yourself!"

"You have no idea what he's just gone through, Mikey," Don pointed out. "Raph is in a severe state of depression right now, and it's normal for depressive people to have suicidal thoughts."

"You're making it sound like a good thing," snarled Mike.

"It's—"

"We know you know a bunch of crap, okay? That doesn't matter."

Don held up his hands. "I'm saying everyone should have seen this coming. I was looking for this a long time ago. Now that he's had a run-in with House—"

"You don't know anything about that," snapped Mike.

"Quiet, Mike," Leo said warningly. "Raph's right in the other room."

"Nothing wakes him up—you know that, Leo," Mike shot back.

"Don't push it. And I do think Don's right. This comes very close to proving to me that Raph killed House."

Mike looked like he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "What?"

"Raph heard you talking to April. He came after you, not because of Casey, but because of House. The more I think about it, the more I think Raph took House away from the scene and killed him. Nothing else makes sense. He wouldn't leave him there. House was why he'd come."

Mike stared at Leo with a slight frown on his face, trying to pinpoint the problem with that assumption.

It wasn't until after practice that he approached Leo with his conclusion. Don had gone to take a shower while Leo replaced the fallen punching bag onto its chain.

"Raph wouldn't kill House," Mike said softly.

Leo glanced at him sharply. "What do you think he would do?"

"I think he would want to hurt him. I think he'd want to let him know who's in charge now. He'd make sure both he and House knew that Raph was, I dunno, superior, then…he might kill him. But…" Mike trailed off.

Leo's eyes had become swords, cold and alarmed and focused. "But what did House say to Raph?" he said softly. "What if Raph wasn't so much stronger after all?"

It made sense. Too much sense. House was alive, kept somewhere by Raph. Which meant he was still a danger, and was still doing harm. And Leo had to find him.

"Thank you, Mike," Leo whispered.

He would find him.

When Donatello came out of the shower after practice, Raphael was still asleep on the couch. Splinter had left the rocking chair and was in the kitchen placing a frozen waffle in the toaster. The television was still on, set to cartoons—a staple of Michelangelo's morning, but said younger brother was already making a beeline for the bathroom. Don picked the remote up from the coffee table and changed it to Discovery Health. Then he glanced at the couch, where Raph slept on.

Raph would never agree to a check-up. Not after the fight about the amitriptyline. But just last night, something had happened that had so shaken him that he had sat in the darkness of his room and refused to let anyone near him.

Raphael's leg wound had kept him from practice the past few weeks, and though it was now nothing more than a scar, Raph still did not return to practice. He did not lift weights. He did not exercise at the punching bag. All possible physical outlets were ignored. His sleeping brother lay motionless on the couch. Beneath his head was tucked an arm, shrunken from weeks of inactivity, just like his stout legs and broad shoulders. Don found it difficult to believe, even with the atrophy, that a common thug could overpower a ninja. But this was House, and an emotionally crippled Raphael. All it took was a wrong word, a wrong touch during a scuffle, and Raph would be down for the count.

After that, House could do anything at all, anything he wanted. What sort of sick person would continue to torment someone they had already thoroughly broken? Once Raph came back to himself, he would panic, and the adrenaline would allow him to overpower House. House might have died by intent or by accident—Raph's strength and natural aggression were so out-of-control—but either

way, Raph had stumbled back to the lair, blinded with trauma upon trauma, and isolated himself in his room.

Raphael would never agree to a check-up.

Don's fingers toyed with the edge of Raph's blanket by his feet, wondering if an invasion of privacy would be justified in this case. Raph could be sporting hidden wounds, small unattended injuries that would swiftly lead to infection and shock. His brain flashed an index card before his eyes, a picture of Raph lying in the shower, damaged and bleeding. He could see each of his brother's wounds —an abrasion on his cheek, bruises on his face and arms, leg punctured by a careless bullet, and hidden, what his eyes could not see and his mind could not look away from, the most dangerous wounds of all. Inside Raph's body, ruptures in a delicate intestine could be leaking toxic fecal matter into his bloodstream, poisoning him.

A flash of the image he'd had for days—Raph shivering and thrashing in bed, fever mounting into an inferno, eyes unaware of the world around him, gasping out a few feeble final breaths and then…

Fingers pinched the edge of the cover and lifted carefully, trying not to disturb the sleeper. There, the scar from the bullet wound, a deep, pale dimple in the smooth green flesh. Further up, there was no way to tell—Raph's knees were together, and his shell covered everything in shadow. Still, Don was perfectly able to seize the nearby lamp and shed some light on the mystery.

That was going too far.

He lowered the blanket slowly, gently, not wanting to disturb his brother. For several seconds, he stared at the blanket, a little stunned at what he'd almost done. Then, hearing the sound of a throat clearing, he froze. Almost against his own will, his eyes heaved upward as though weighted.

Splinter stood on the other side of the couch, gripping his walking stick and looking sorely tempted to use it. "Donatello," he whispered in barely restrained anger, "come with me."

Don wasn't in trouble often, but he knew what Splinter's room looked like when he entered it for a reprimand. Normally, his sensei's room was a haven of peace and protection. Whenever he came into Splinter's room as a convict, the shadows seemed to deepen, the candles emphasizing the fathomless darkness with their cold bronze sparking. Don knelt automatically on the tatami mats, nerve endings barely sensitive to the rough weave that always left impressions in his knees by the end.

Splinter did not kneel himself. He loomed over his son, hands clasped behind his back. "Justify yourself," he demanded.

Don noted he hadn't asked for an explanation. Splinter knew why Don had done what he did. "It was for his own good," Don said softly, knowing he was already doomed.

"His own good?" Splinter's voice was very quiet, but powerful. "To violate your brother once again with your own eyes is good?"

"He won't let me do a check-up." Don's words began to fall into the pattern he always took when he ranted. "He won't let me look him over to see if he's hurt, and I know House must have tried something, otherwise he wouldn't be this"—

"Have you asked Raphael to let you look at him?" Splinter said sharply.

"There's no *point* ," Don protested helplessly, starting to get a little angry himself. "He'd just say no—"

"And why would he say no?"

"Because I tried to trick him…" The tempo of Don's words slowed to a pause, and he sighed. "…with the amitriptyline."

"And he does not trust you."

"Right."

"Because you broke that trust, Donatello. You have no right to be angry at him because of this."

"But…but," Don sputtered, "what if House was able to…again… and…and Raph's hurt there, and he goes into toxic shock—"

"Would there be anything you could do to prevent it?" Splinter's eyes bored into him like dull knives lit with napalm.

Don stared at his master, wide-eyed as the enormity of what he'd been doing hit him like a thunderbolt, freezing his hands and feet with electric shock.

"Donatello?" growled Splinter.

Don's mouth opened, but he couldn't make a sound.

Fortunately, Splinter didn't wait for him. "You will spend the rest of the morning in your room, in meditation." He turned away from his son. Growling, he added, "And you will thank our ancestors that you did not wake your brother as you gawked at him."

"Hai, sensei," Don choked. "I'm so sorry—"

"Donatello! Your room!"

Don jerked to his feet and bolted through the door. Walking quickly through the living room, he could not even glance at the couch to see if Raph was awake. He didn't want to know if his brother had awakened before Don had gone into Splinter's room. He was better off not knowing.

In his room, he sank onto his bed and doubled over, stomach churning with acid and nausea. He was sure he had used a year's

supply of Pepto Bismol over the last month, and wished to God he wasn't out.

Maybe he was too dangerous to be around Raph. Every time he tried to help, he only hurt him more.

Maybe it would be better for them both if he left him alone.

The thought made Don feel even sicker, but it made horrifying sense.

Mike returned to the couch to find it empty, and, glancing up, saw Raph rummaging in the cereal cabinet. He hesitated, then approached the kitchen cautiously. His brother had yanked a box of shredded wheat from the cabinet and set it on the counter. A dive into another cabinet produced a bowl, and a venture into the fridge uncovered milk.

"Mornin'," Mike said carefully, not wanting to set his brother off for no reason.

Raph glanced over his shoulder. "Mornin'." With that, he turned back to pouring the shredded wheat into the bowl.

Mike cleared his throat. "April's letting me borrow the first season of Family Guy." The DVD was actually Casey's, but Mike was not convinced that mentioning the vigilante would earn him bonus points. "Interested in a Stewathon?" He forced a little pep into his voice.

Raph paused while dousing his cereal with milk. "No, Mikey," he growled, "I ain't interested in watchin' more movies with ya while ya keep lookin' at me ta see if I'm cured yet." He continued to pour, and poured too much. He swore and picked up the bowl to sip the excess milk away.

The younger turtle couldn't resist a small smile, half-certain that Raph was at least half-joking. "Aren't we pissy today?" he teased,

leaning against a counter. "They make birth control pills for this kinda thing, Raph."

Raph snorted and said nothing as he shoved the milk back into the fridge, slammed the door, and sorted through a drawer. Suddenly he stopped, staring blankly into space, then back down at the drawer in confusion. Mike stepped forward quickly, but stopped himself. For once thing, he wasn't sure what he could do but make things worse. For another, even if he could, Raph would resist his help.

"You okay?" he ventured.

Raph blinked. "Yeah," he breathed as though sleepwalking. "I jus'… f'got what I was lookin' for." He stared hard at the drawer as he would at a fire that both frightened and fascinated him.

"Spoon?" Mike supplied helpfully.

Raph frowned and slammed the drawer shut, opening another right afterwards. He pulled a spoon from the drawer and stabbed it into the shredded wheat. He picked up the bowl and carried it to the table. "You still here?" he demanded gruffly.

Mike made a show of grabbing a can of soda from the refrigerator. He wasn't actually thirsty, but maybe acting nonchalant about it all would put Raph in a better mood. Secretly, he was a little stung, but knew Raph didn't mean any of this hostility. He was just being Raph. Depressed, post-traumatic, possibly suicidal Raph.

Mike sat in front of the television all day and watched nothing.

"'Sup, Tiger?"

"Angel, it's Leo."

"Oh! Uh, hey. 'Sup?"

"You know members of the Purple Dragons."

"Uh…yeah?"

"What do you know about House?"

"You too, huh?"

"Me too? Did Raph call about him?"

"Yeah, askin' where he lived, that kind of thing. I didn't like House, he thought he was better than everyone else just 'cause he got a degree. Is…everything okay?"

"You told Raph where House lives?"

"Yeah…there a problem?"

"Did he say what he wanted with him?"

"No. Um... What's goin' on?"

"Don't worry about it, Angel. Has Raph contacted you since?"

"Nope."

"Okay. Give me directions to House's place. Speak slowly."

Leo squinted through the window of House's apartment. It was dark, with no signs of life. Whoever lived there wasn't there right now, and that frustrated Leo. Either House was simply out, or he was still wherever Raph had taken him, which could be anywhere. Raph knew all the hiding places on these streets, every abandoned warehouse, every hole in the wall, every empty corner. Raph could be hiding House under Leo's metaphorical nose.

Leo crept back up the wall and swung over to crouch on the rooftop. The shuko spikes came off and he tucked them into his belt. He was

not satisfied with how this expedition was going. He had found House's apartment, but the only thing he'd learned from it was that House wasn't there—something he'd already suspected. Raph had House. He might have killed him by now. And Leo had no lead, no way of knowing where Raph had taken him.

He was probably keeping him somewhere nearby. That was the only thing Leo could think. Not in the sewers, of course—it would be too close, too much of a risk to keep an enemy so near their home. Raph would never endanger his own family like that. Not if he had retained any real sense of what was going on around him.

So the place to start would be in areas surrounding the manhole nearest their lair.

Leo took off over the rooftops, his search having only begun.

Sky. The hazy, shallow glow that cloaked the sky, at least, hovering somewhere over the rooftops. Light from the street stained the asphalt the color of dull brass. He'd spent the worst twenty minutes of his life in this alley. He lay there, on his back, staring up at the sky, legs sprawled apart. No one was there. No one could see him lying there, vulnerable, open, exposed.

He sensed rather than saw someone appear at the entrance to the alley.

No.

They approached, their footsteps echoing hollowly against the asphalt, against the walls.

"Look at that! How convenient!"

He knew without trying that he couldn't lift his arms, couldn't cry out for help, couldn't kick or fight. He could look down, toward his parted knees, and see one of the passers by drop eagerly to the ground

between them. His head jerked up again, eyes snapping onto the sky.

"No," was all the resistance he could offer.

And beyond the man and his friend, an entire line of people watching, waiting their turn. Faces suddenly blocked his view of the dismal sky. Laughing Jezimar, idiot Jimmy, smirking House, leaning over him and sneering, "Whore! Bitch!"

Standing off in the shadows was a smirking Enzo, and unseen, Malcolm, who didn't care enough to watch.

Suddenly Leonardo was in his face, holding a video camera. "You're so popular, Raph, how do you feel?" he asked with the excitement of a news reporter at a football game.

A hand pressed against his plastron, then disappeared. Raph glanced down, and there was a gold star where he had been touched, and hovering beside him, a grinning Michelangelo.

"Check his blood pressure," murmured Donatello's voice. "We've got to get this on record." Suddenly a host of Donatellos were everywhere, checking his temperature, blood pressure, and heart rate.

Raph glanced down the line, which had grown longer. At the end stood a dark figure, face shadowed in the depths of a hood, but he knew him from the bare ends of hair snaking from the shadows.

Casey Jones was waiting his turn.

The first man was finished with him, and Raph groaned long in pain, limbs twitching with shocks of terror as the next man dropped down between his knees.

He woke with the same thought he'd had upon awaking each night for the past three days.

I am so fucked up.

Chapter 10

Four footfalls to every inhale, the muscles worked in his brother's legs and arms as he jogged through the sewer.

The breathing was a form of meditation. Leonardo knew that Raphael, even though out of shape, would not be this breathless after such a short run, and he certainly would not be making noise while breathing. The rhythmic inhales and exhales formed a percussive pattern with his footfalls, with the swish of liquid in the bottle of juice Raphael held in one swinging hand, with the splash of moisture against concrete and random drops of condensation falling like bells to the floor, a small symphony of distractive sound. Raphael did not want to be thinking about something. He was pushing himself forward, distracting himself with the sounds and the movements so that he could keep himself from thinking. The repetitive serenade became completely brainless, but almost as distracting for the turtle following Raphael as it was for Raph himself.

Leo focused on the sound, using it to drive himself forward rather than to numb his mind, and used it to direct himself to Raph's location. It was only two days into his search for House, and finally, he had caught Raphael leaving the lair, presumably for wherever he was hiding the gangster. In addition to a bottle of grape juice, Raphael was carrying, oddly enough, a handful of straws.

Four footfalls to each inhale, four to each exhale, and Raphael suddenly came to a stop. So did the rhythm. He had reached a conjunction with another tunnel. He dropped the straws and juice and sank into a sitting position on the floor, covering his face with his hands and gulping deep, shuddering breaths. Leonardo did not make a move, but watched Raphael in utter silence from the shadows as he approached unnoticed. His once-proud brother was unknowingly giving him this display of emotion. Fire lit his face, embarrassed for Raphael, and suddenly he was ashamed of his spying. Raph looked so vulnerable in the most open show of emotion

Leo had seen since they were children, a show he did not mean for any eyes to see, stripped of all pride and reason and trying to gather strength only to stand up, let alone walk.

Leo wondered what House had said to him, if Raph was so afraid to face him.

Raphael suddenly swiped up the dropped items and furiously shoved himself to his feet. After two more breaths, he swerved to the side and walked briskly into the adjoining tunnel. Leonardo only followed when his brother had been swallowed by the shadows.

Leo hesitated at the entrance, peering in and being met with surprise by two glimmers of light winking at his eyes. As his pupils adjusted, he could see two camping lanterns, dim as though running out of batteries, set on the floor of the room at the end of the tunnel on either side of a large pillar. The dim light illuminated pale skin. A large man glowed in the sheet of tan light he knelt in, hands and feet in front of him, cuffed together, and a thick rope crossing his broad chest and belly several times. The gangster looked like he had seen better days. Multicolored bruises speckled his drawn face, his shaved head lolling against the stone pillar even as his eyes followed Raphael as the ninja breezed by him and picked up a fallen chair. Raph did not look at House until he had flipped the chair into position and sat on it. Then he leaned against his knees and stared forward, burning a mark into the gangster with his eyes.

"I give ya credit for gettin' your hands up front," he said gruffly. Leo squinted at his suddenly-collected brother, an image forming in his mind of what Raph must be talking about. It was a truly paralyzing way of tying someone, their hands and feet tied together behind them. House must have struggled for hours to bring his limbs up front, where they would receive proper circulation.

House's face wrinkled in a grim sneer as he gave a tired, ironic chuckle. "Probably saved me from getting my legs amputated. Unless you wanna tie me back the way I was."

Raph scoffed. "You'd like that." He set the bottle of juice on the floor, selected two straws and pinched the end of one.

House's sneer turned into a full grin. "Yes, I would," he admitted. "I'd be a hero over at Headquarters twice over."

Raph stopped suddenly, eyes rising sharply to meet his captive. Leo grit his teeth hard, fists clenching, toes curling against the concrete as his body flashed cold. House met Raph's eyes briefly, then chuckled. "I didn't tell you about that, did I?"

Raph tensed, but said nothing. Leo didn't blame him. He didn't want to think of Hun or any of their other enemies knowing about what had happened, either. Raph slid the pinched end of the straw into another straw, making a long tube. "Broughtcha somethin'." He unscrewed the cap of the bottle of juice and placed the straw inside the bottle. "It's your breakfast, lunch, an' dinner for however the fuck long I decide."

"Why thank you," House said pleasantly as though he were a guest at a little-known relative's Thanksgiving dinner. "Since you're giving me liquids, I assume you're planning at least to let me up so I can take a piss." This was said with a threatening note in his voice, the comfortable power House held making itself known in this disguised request.

Raph, never impressed with power, snorted as he pushed himself to his feet. "Piss on yourself," he sneered, handing the bottle of juice to the bound gangster.

House reached past the juice and seized hold of Raphael's wrist, yanking him inward hard enough to snap the turtle's head back. As though automated, Leo's hand flew to the hilt of one sword. Before he could draw, Raph tensed and snapped his arm towards House's thumb, breaking the gangster's grip and stumbling backwards. He slammed the juice on the floor before the gangster's feet. House's face wrinkled in amusement and he gave a deep, resounding belly laugh as though Raph were a child too precious for words. Leo's

blood ran hot, and his grip tightened around the hilt of his sword. The second House gave him an excuse, any excuse…

Oh, he wanted any excuse.

But Raph was already storming past him, far too distracted to notice him. House was alone. Leo clutched the hilt of his sword, staring at the gangster, whose eyes still glinted with amusement. He wet his lips, heart pounding, heat rising in his blood and drying his mouth, then released, his fingers uncurling from the sword-hilt, heart rate slowing, muscles unraveling. He watched the captive through narrow eyes, then set off after his brother.

After all, he wasn't doing this for House.

Splinter's voice, a timeless lullaby, soft, fragrant beneath his fingers, earth, a hollow grave. The one dream he had that was still untainted. He fell into the shadows. Earth snowed upon him, sprinkled by unknown hands, and when there was nothing but dark, he floated to the surface, free, and raised his eyes to see…

…Worlds and universes, plains of existence known and unknown, all waiting for him, all beckoning and holding their arms open for him. Multitudes of possibilities, and he hesitated.

And while he hesitated, every darkness he had buried alive seeped from the earth, escaping its grave and flying toward him. He could feel it wrap around his arms, and it felt like crushing fingers, and its knees dug into his thighs, parting his legs, and it hurt him, there, and it laughed with Jezimar's voice.

He opened his eyes and saw asphalt.

A groan, tired, sick, and frightened, broke Leo's sleep like a sheet of frail obsidian. After a moment of bewildered panic that he did not understand, he heard it again. Raphael. Something was different

about tonight. Leo tore back his covers and rolled out of his low bed, padded across the cool floor to the doorway. From Raph's room he could hear sharp, hitched breathing. He pressed the door open and peered in.

Raph was sitting up in bed, eyes wide and vacant, every muscle in his body coiled and tense, shaking, his breath shuddering in and out between his parted lips. A cold needle pierced Leo's heart, and he quickly stepped into the room and sat on the edge of the bed opposite his brother. Raph's pupils were constricted to pinpricks, his face drained. As though sensing something changing about the room, his unseeing eyes fluttered, darting about the room without sight, head frozen in place as though he were afraid to move.

"Raph," whispered Leo, heart cracking against his ribs.

There was no response but a slight widening of the eyes, a frightened reflex without recognition of the voice.

"Raphael," he whispered again, "it's Leo."

Raph shrank back a little, obviously disoriented. Leo wet his lips. It was dark. Raph couldn't see him. Raph wasn't convinced that he was there.

How vivid it must be, whatever illusion plagued him.

"I'm here," he whispered in restrained desperation, unable to take his proud brother's paralyzing fear any longer. He reached forward with two steady hands for Raph's shoulders, intending to prove himself real. Halfway there, he froze.

Touching him would make it worse. Raph would be frightened of the touch. He would draw away or attack him, or have a panic attack.

Then what?

"Raph," Leo said gently, trying to capture his brother's eyes with his own, "I need you to reach out and touch my hands. You'll find me. I'm here."

Confusion. Doubt. Fear. Raph did not believe him.

"Raph," Leo said urgently, desperate to break the terror that encased him, "trust me. Reach out. I'm here."

Raph shook his head slowly, and Leo's heart sank. Would it always be this way, him reaching, Raphael withdrawing, like a Renaissance painting, forever stretching and forever hesitating? It was the life they had lived since that horrible night, when he had been unable to aid his brother the first time. The only thing he could do now was watch the terror in Raphael's eyes and wish he could take it himself. It would be easier than watching it ravage his brother over and over.

Then, amongst the fear and doubt, a look of fire, of determination darkened Raph's face. One shaking hand twitched on the covers, then slowly crawled forward. It lifted off the covers, then suddenly struck out, grabbing, seeking, missing, his glazed eyes searching, not finding. His breath caught. His jaw set, and his hand came closer.

Three fingers touched, clasped, intertwined.

Raphael found him with his eyes, and everything fell away.

One sharp breath exploded from Raph's chest, and his face crumpled for an instant before smoothing out. His head bowed, his eyes slid closed. Leo, relieved, pulled him firmly into a half-hug, and Raphael's arms curled around him, his body trembling with vague, nameless fears.

"Fuckin' pavement," murmured Raphael, still half-asleep. "Flashlight…hurts…it hurts…"

"Shhhh," Leo hushed gently, rocking his brother like a child and rubbing his carapace reassuringly. "It's gone now."

Meaningless gasps and noises, then, words that brought another chill to Leo's heart. "It's my fault."

"No," Leo said immediately.

"I didn't even fight 'em off, I fuckin' deserved it."

Leo paused, disturbed. "Did I deserve it?"

"Didn't happen to you."

"Yes it did. Same time it happened to you."

"Leonardo?" Leo's eyes snapped to the door, where Splinter stood, leaning against his walking stick with a concerned look on his face.

"He's okay, Sensei," Leo said softly, catching his own breath as the tightness eased from his chest. Even as he spoke the words, he knew them only to be half-true.

Splinter seemed to understand this, hobbling up to Raphael and touching his shoulder gingerly. "Raphael," he said softly, "I will make you more of the tea I gave you the other night, if you wish. But you must tell me."

A moment of shuddering and hesitation, and Raph nodded. Splinter's eyes darted up to meet Leo's. He mouthed the name of an herb carefully, and Leo nodded softly in understanding. He transferred Raph to Splinter's embrace and pushed to his feet to obey.

Leo left Raph to the comforting arms of their father and closed the door behind him. Now that the slight shock and fear had passed, his blood burned him. His proud brother, shivering and whimpering in his arms, and he unable to comfort him.

Hurts…it hurts…

It's my fault. I fuckin' deserved it.

He had all the excuses he needed. One man who had committed a crime against his brother still had not paid the consequences. That would change tonight.

Chapter 11

Chapter Eleven

Raph did not drink the tea. He did not go back to sleep after Splinter left his room. He was calm, humiliated, and fully awake now. He lay on his bed, facing the wall, using its neutral surface as a blank page for his thoughts. His stomach churned, his whole body rebelling against the vision of his brother seeing him at his weakest. His tongue flicked out to wet his lips. His throat was dry, his mouth parched. This was worse than the stuttering. Leo would never see him as anything but a victim now.

I am so fucked up.

He swallowed the bitter taste of bile in his mouth. How long had it been since he had eaten? Had an appetite at all? Days, maybe over a week. There was no sense of time anymore. It had been at least since before he took House. He ate when he thought he could do so without losing it, but it had grown into a ritual purely to keep himself alive. Now, it was a ritual he would rather abandon. There was no purpose to it anymore.

His eyes slid closed. As far as the calendar went, it hadn't been that long since he had lived a relatively satisfying life that he had taken completely for granted. It was barely remembered now, a strand of silk in his mind, a fragmented glimpse of someone else's life. Years had not passed, although it felt otherwise, only their power to erode his memory and leave him stranded, precariously balanced on the halfway point between life and death. He was not dead, but he was far from alive, even further since he had stopped recognizing himself.

The shadows around him could have been from his own grave. He could still imagine the soft touch of earth, the peace of burying everything that was killing him. He couldn't stand this anymore. He

couldn't live like this. Whatever it took to cure this cancer, he would do, even if it meant impaling his brain on his own sai. It was better than half-living. It was better than knowing the power his enemies held over him, and worse, the way his family saw him, emasculated, fragile, helpless.

The dream replayed itself behind his eyes, and he tried to retain the feeling of that freedom, that release. Letting go. It didn't matter anymore, the pain, the anger, the humiliation. The hands, the asphalt, they had nothing to do with his life now. It was over. It was gone, buried, released, let go.

Let go.

I have to let him go .

His eyes slid open. For a split second, he couldn't believe he had had that thought. But revenge had not worked, and leaving House bound a short walk from his home was driving him insane. He couldn't stand to look at him anymore. He would let him go, and the consequences would be the consequences.

His brain spun with an almost giddy feeling, and he stripped the covers away and rolled out of bed. He was going to let House go. It was the one thing in the universe that he could control, the one aspect of this that he could physically let go, and it made strange sense.

I'm going to let him go . His mind used those words as a mantra, blocking out the rest of the world as he stumbled like a madman from his room and down the stairs. *I'm going to let go or die* .

Leo stood in the shadows, out of the fading light of the battery-powered lanterns, watching House drowse against the stone pillar. *Alive in spite of the efforts of many* , he thought ironically. He had strapped his swords to his back before leaving, but had not touched them since. He was not prepared to do anything to House until they

had come to an understanding, and definitely not while the gangster was half-asleep. House deserved to see and fear the consequences of his actions.

A deliberate footstep, too loud to go unnoticed. House's head snapped up, his eyes forced into focus, and his face smoothed out. A moment of silence settled over the room, and House grinned, glancing to the side and giving a slight wink.

"You always come back."

Leo said nothing, did nothing, but remained where he was, covered in the shadows of the tunnel.

House laughed—a deep, lazy sound. "Won't even come out and look me in the face anymore, bitch?"

At any other time, Leo would have gotten angry. This time, he didn't bother. House was going to pay for that remark soon, and it wouldn't matter. He quietly walked forward into the fading light, eyes half-lidded, narrowed at the gangster, face as even as a sheet of marble. "I'm no one's bitch," he said lowly.

House blinked, eyes lighting with sudden confusion, and his head snapped toward Leo, pale brows knit with sudden alarm. So the coward wasn't so bold whenhe wasn't kicking a bound prisoner. Leo kept his eyes on the man, casually striding about him in a lazy circle. "On the contrary," he continued, "I'm the one you *really* have to be nervous about."

There was a long pause from House. Leo was coming around behind him and couldn't see his face, but he heard slight stops of breath, clicking noises, as though House was trying to decide what to say. Leo remained patient, smirking a little to himself as he came up front again. "I think you and the little whore got your lines from the same movies," House said finally.

In one swift motion, Leo swept one of his ninjaken out of its sheathe and made four small cuts on House's face. The letter R was now etched into the pale flesh on the left-hand side of his high forehead, written before House could even flinch. By the time the first curse made it past House's lips, Leo had sheathed his sword again. "Did you want to try that again?" Leo purred, face as smooth as before.

House gritted his teeth. "Self-righteous little bastard. Talk about how much better you are, and neither you nor your little circus have any problem with torture."

"This isn't torture, House," Leo corrected him gently. "This is penance. Your penance. Since you won't do it willingly, I am forcing you to do it. Because sometimes, it's better to go ahead and see the light than have a real reason to be scared of the dark."

A sharp laugh burst from House's lungs. "Hyeah, talk about your movie lines. You're pathetic."

The sword flashed out again, and six more lines were cut. Beside the R was an A and a P. "You're running out of letters, House. I'll tell you, from what I hear, they hate rapists in jail. It would be fitting for you to spend the rest of your life as someone's bitch. They'd make you grow your hair out."

A rush of air hissed from House's clenched teeth, his face flooding with red as he absorbed the pain. "Is that what you're doing? Carving letters in my head? You gotta be more creative than that."

"I'm not concerned with creativity," Leo murmured, sword point barely delving into the flesh beside the P and slowly drawing the I in a single line. House exhaled through his teeth again, then defiantly raised his eyes to Leo's, attempting to stare him down. Leo didn't concern himself with the petty behavior. "What you did to my brother was beyond anything I would do to my worst enemy, although I hope you experience it, so you can know the damage you caused." Slowly, he drew the sharp angles of the S. "What you did to my family, I hope your family experiences, although I wish to the ancestors that I

didn't feel that way. You've turned me into a person I don't recognize. Who knows what I'll do next." He hadn't planned to draw the T yet, but there it was, done, and blood streamed down into House's pale, defiant eyes. Leo wiped the tip of his sword on the gangster's filthy shirt and sheathed it. He stepped back to admire his work. "It suits you," he concluded.

"Fuck you," snarled House. "The little fucker was asking for it, just like the rest of you. You all shoulda known what you were getting into when you started messing with us. Either makes him fucking stupid or fucking naïve."

Leo snorted, coming around to the back of the chair. "In sixteen years of his life, you'd find it impossible to be either. You don't know what we are, House."

Silence lay on the room for a moment, then, House's quiet voice touched it. "He's sixteen?"

Leo turned suddenly, eyes narrow. "What the fuck does it matter to you? Surprised he has an age?" Upon turning, he got the briefest glimpse of House's pale eyes tainted with doubt before they went cold again.

"Shut up," growled the gangster. "You don't know shit about me or anyone else that was there."

"I know enough," Leo murmured. "You're rapists and murderers, all of you."

"He's just a kid," House muttered at the same time, as if to himself.

Leo raised his eye ridges. "What?"

House glanced up at him, face darkening like a storm cloud. "I said he's just a stupid kid," he sneered, "and you should thank us for showing him how the world works."

"It's only your world that works that way," Leo retorted darkly. "Down here, it's our world. Down here, there is justice for us."

"Justice?" House's eyes glittered as they drifted far away. He slowly relaxed, a calm and contented look on his blood-streaked face. "I don't know what the little slut told you about the men you murdered, but none of them were bad people."

"Oh?" murmured Leo, taking a slow step toward the man.

"What, you think your boy was special or something? Rape happens all the time, freak, if you didn't notice. It's not special. Hell, it's not even a big deal. We've all done it. Your little friend wasn't the first bitch Jez did in an alley."

Leo's face darkened.

"Jez, I gotta tell ya. Brilliant man. He could crack any one of us up without even thinking about it. He was like a little kid, sometimes, in the best way. Kicked ass at Guitar Hero and Crash Bandicoot. Sucked at poker, though—you could always read his face, no matter how hard he tried. Always sang in the shower." House's lips quirked. "Never did a bitch the same way twice. Always had to throw something interesting in."

"I'm not interested," growled Leo.

"I know. I bet you're interested in nobody outside of your freak show. In that case, I'll tell you what happened to…" another smile twitched House's lips, "….your brother."

Leo took another step forward, face as blank as paved ice.

House got a faraway look again. "You shoulda heard him scream when Jez started. His head snapped back. His eyes got huge. His jaw clenched to cut off the scream. He was practically kissing the pavement there, but we flipped him over after a bit to make him watch." His eyes traced Leo's face for a reaction. He got none. "Then

he was trembling like a bitch in a movie from the forties. Like he was in shock before, and now he was shit scared. You could tell it hurt like hell, too. He screamed again after a minute or so and spat in Jez's face." Here, his voice acquired a note of bitterness. "So Jez made him suck off the flashlight."

Leo took another step forward, more quickly, but froze at House's next words.

"He started crying."

Leo's eyes narrowed in disbelief.

House smirked. "I don't think he realized it. But he was crying. Like a little girl. Then he went limp as an old man and passed out. Wouldn't wake up when we slapped him around, so Jimmy got up and took a piss on him."

Leo stepped forward, and was now less than a yard from House. He whispered, voice shaking slightly, dark eyes narrowed to slits and burning like the sun.

"Do you want me to kill you?"

That forced a chuckle from House. "I know you types. You think you're the antithesis of everything we are. You're not the killing type."

In response, Leo drew a sword and ran it through his heart.

A torrent of blood burst from House's chest, showering Leo's face and chest with warm crimson. House went limp, an almost comical look of surprise frozen onto his broad face. Leo yanked the sword from the gangster's body and furiously wiped his eyes. Blood stung them, and involuntary tears hurried to wash them clean. Blinking, Leo pulled his cleaning rag from his belt. He wiped his eyes first, then his sword, and sheathed it.

He turned to go, only to find Raphael standing ten feet away, staring blankly at the body of House.

Leo froze. "Raph…"

"You k-killed him," murmured Raph, eyes wide.

Leo stepped forward carefully, trying not to set off his brother's temper. "This is our justice, Raph," he said softly. "The justice the world won't give us. He never would have paid for what he did if I hadn't—"

"I was gonna let him g-go," said Raph, a slight growl entering his voice.

"To what purpose?" Leo asked gently, but pointedly, his intense eyes focused on his brother. "So he could do it again?"

"FUCK YOU, LEO!" Raph suddenly exploded, looking two millimeters from breaking into a mad dash and beating his brother senseless. "You have NO IDEA what's in my head, you have NO IDEA what I was thinking, AND I WISH YOU WOULD FUCKING STOP THINKING YOU DO!"

Before Leo could think of a response, Raph slammed his fist into a wall. "DAMMIT, LEO! Why'd you have to…FUCK!"

Leo stared at his brother, ribs cracking from the beat of his own heart, keeping a healthy distance. Raph's voice had reached a strange, unstable pitch, and he thrashed about as if anxious by the lack of furniture to topple. When Raph was like this, he was likely to turn on anyone nearby, and Leo had never seen him this mental.

"People keep tellin' me to let go of what happened, but I DON'T… KNOW WHAT PART I CAN LET GO OF. A lot of it—it's part of me, it's in my HEAD, and it ain't gonna disappear. But THIS guy, I COULD LET GO. I could just let him disappear. I'm just…I'M SICK OF FEELIN' LIKE THIS, I'M SICK OF BEIN' UNABLE TO CONTROL

ANYTHING , I'M SICK OF SEEIN' HIS FACE. BUT I CAN'T LET HIM GO NOW, 'CAUSE YOU FUCKING KILLED HIM!"

Leo blinked, somewhat unable to believe his eyes. Raph was crying. A mist of tears appeared in his eyes and hovered there, refusing to drop, even through his explosive ranting. "I got…I was RAPED, Leo. THEY FUCKED ME WITH A FLASHLIGHT AND CALLED ME A DIRTY WHORE, AND EVERY FUCKING TIME YOU FIGHT MY BATTLES FOR ME, IT HAPPENS OVER AND OVER AND OVER AND OVER—"

He was hyperventilating. Leo grew concerned that he was having a panic attack. He moved forward cautiously, but was unsure how he could calm his brother when he was this frenzied. If he intervened, Raph might attack him. On the other hand, if he did not, Raph might actually have a stroke.

Leo raised his hands passively. "I'm sorry," he said in soothing tones, "I didn't know it meant that to you." But his heart was already sinking. He might have destroyed his brother's last chance at resolving his feelings about what had happened.

Raph stood frozen for a moment, staring at nothing, then his shaking hands found the chair he had sat in during his days with House. Leo leapt backwards, but Raph swung the chair upward and brought it down on House's still body with a crack. Again. Again. Again. Wood beat against dead flesh, bone was crushed, and cries rent the air with chords of lunatic rage. The chair flew across the room and splintered against the wall, and Raphael swung a fist at his brother.

Leo caught the fist easily, but was shocked by the force behind it. He blocked the next strike, and another, and Raph suddenly seized forward and grasped with both hands at his throat. Leo swerved to the side. Using Raph's momentum against him, he propelled his brother forward until he stumbled and dropped to his knees. Then Leo stepped back and waited.

Raph knelt on the cold floor, panting, gasping, clutching at his chest as though trying to force it to expand with his own hands.

"Breathe," Leo said softly, taking a few cautious steps in Raph's direction.

"Can't," panted Raph.

"In through the nose," Leo said, hoping his terror did not communicate. Raph had never been like this. "Out through the mouth."

"C'breathe."

"Slowly." Leo knelt by Raph and helped him into a sitting position. "Head between your knees."

"C'breathe."

"All the way, below your heart." Leo's own heart pounded.

"C…h…"

"Slowly…"

Raph's breathing slowed a little. "Can' breathe in here," he gasped.

"Shhhh…"

"No air…"

"Don't talk. Just breathe. Slowly."

"I didn't cry," Raph whispered, breath shuddering.

"What?"

"I didn't cry when they did it. He was lying. I didn't…"

"I know. I believe you."

"No you don't."

Leo's hand gently stroked Raph's carapace. "Why would I believe him over you?"

"You asked him, didn't ya?"

Leo frowned suddenly, nervous again. "What?"

Raph shoved him away and started struggling to his feet. "You asked him for the whole story," he said bitterly, voice rising in volume gradually, "'cause ya didn't know enough already, ya couldn't leave FUCKING WELL ALONE."

"I didn't ask him," Leo said calmly, raising his hands in a placating manner, rising at the same time to his feet.

Raph shook his head back and forth slowly, backing away. "I..gotta go," he said, voice breaking. He started forward at a brisk walk that turned first into a jog, then a sprint.

"Raph!" Leo called, jolting into a jog to follow his brother. Raph was maniacal. Leo didn't want to think about what he might do now.

"Don't follow me!" Raph bellowed back at him before disappearing down the tunnel, voice bouncing off the walls. By the time Leo made it out to the hallway, Raph was nowhere in sight.

In through the nose, out through the mouth.

He had lost Leo somewhere back there, but he wasn't going to risk being found. He tried to lose himself in the sewers, but it was impossible. He knew them too well, as much as he wanted to forget them. He'd hated these tunnels all his life, these cramped, damp veins of filth and dark, stagnant air. Catacombs crawling with insects

and rats, his enforced home, his prison. The life he'd been sentenced to since coming into an existence he had never chosen. Everything bad in his life had been because of what he was. Couldn't he have been either a turtle or a human, and not some sick mockery of both? If he could, he would have carved out his turtle DNA long ago and walked among the humans. He could at least carve himself out of all of this.

He fell painfully to his knees and yanked one sai from his belt with a shaking hand. If he worked quickly, it wouldn't matter how fast Leo ran. He flipped the sai and held the point to his eye. Through the eye, into the brain, and by the time Leo found him, it wouldn't matter.

An image of Leo carrying his body back to the lair with a sai still sticking out of his eye flashed through his mind, and his gut wrenched. Mike would probably be watching a movie or playing some game. He would be the first to see Leo standing at the doorway with Raph's body. At the sight, he would drop the game controller or the remote and rush toward him, some remote hope deceiving him into thinking there might still be hope. Mike would start screaming something incoherent. Splinter would be the first to arrive then, and the shocked, grieved look on his sensei's face was more than Raph could bear. Don would see them from upstairs as he came out of his room to see what was going on…

Raph doubled over and vomited onto the sewer floor, the sai clanking against the concrete as his hands slapped against its cool surface. For several moments, there was nothing but the heaving and the beads of perspiration blossoming on his heated skin. Then, he stared at the filth, the mess on the sewer floor.

He hated this place.

This wasn't going to be the last thing he ever saw—this sewer, these images in his head.

If I'm going to die, it damn well won't be here .

But he couldn't die on the surface, in the crowded city, for anyone to find. He had to get out.

Casey Jones responded to a knock on his front door to find, to his shock, Raphael standing there. "I needa get out," the turtle said hoarsely.

Casey snatched his keys from the hook by the door and shot over the threshold, shutting the door behind him. "We'll take the truck."

Chapter 12

In, out, in, out

In, out, in, out.

Leo would die before letting Raph get away.

He's going to try something. He's going to try to hurt himself.

His cell rang. He didn't need this right now.

Pick up the phone.

"What is it?"

I don't have time for this.

"Leo?"

Oh please.

"What?"

What the hell do you want, Mikey?

"April's on the phone. You'd better get back here."

Shit.

"I dunno, I think I can just stop an' get groceries in Northampton, April." Casey watched the dead road ahead of him as he drove, making use of the cell phone reception they had just outside the city —it was not going to last—to call April. "Don't think you needa come all the way out with us. 'Sides, this is kinda…guy stuff." He glanced

at the person in the passenger seat. Raph's face was turned away, out the window. He hadn't moved since Casey had started driving.

"Don't you dare leave him alone," April said firmly, somehow retaining her calm, patient, and altogether infuriating "crisis tone." "You can't leave him when he's like this. Not for a few minutes. Make sure you know where he is at all times, and don't let him have any access to ANYTHING he could use to hurt himself."

Casey gritted his teeth, hand tightening around the cell phone until the plastic creaked beneath his fingers. "I know, Ape," he said, "we been over this. I was just thinkin' he could stay in the car while I get stuff. He knows how ta hide." April would understand his odd choice of concerns—he couldn't, himself, discuss Raph's suicidal tendencies, which Don had made them well aware of, while Raph was sitting right next to him, staring like a statue out the glass, or at the glass. "We're gonna need food, Ape."

"Then go through McDonald's. I'll get there a couple hours after you, I'll drop off the groceries, I'll leave. That sound okay?"

"Through the drive-thru? Ape, they can see through the window."

"Don't you have a blanket, or a hat, or—"

"I have a toolbox, a half-eaten bag of chips…" he made a quick glance around the cabin, flicking at a bag of condiments from various fast food places, "uh…"

"What about your mask?" April sounded less patient.

That clicked in Casey's head as something he should have thought of himself, and he was suddenly aware of his own perceived stupidity. "Yeah, that works. Uh—I really better get off the phone. Drivin' an' all."

"Yeah." April sounded quieter. "Sorry I was short."

"Yeah, me too, babe." Casey felt his patience repairing itself, the shame abating. "Gonna miss ya."

"You too. Love ya."

"Love ya too. And April?

"Yeah?"

"Don't…don't tell the others where we're goin'. Raph really needs ta take a break."

"Yeah, I get that feeling."

"So uh…bye."

"Bye."

With the phone tucked into his palm, Casey flipped it closed with two broad fingers and shifted in the seat, awkwardly cramming it into his back pocket as he sat, eyes on the road, trying not to let the car swerve. It was less awkward when the job was done and he could settle back into the seat and drive like a sane person, but he was left, in lieu of April's anxious tones, utter silence as thick and impenetrable as bulletproof glass, plugging his ears.

A fleeting glance at his passenger told him that Raph still had not moved, at least not perceivably. For all Casey could tell, he had not breathed. He made no sound at all. His stiff posture remained frozen as though there was something before his eyes that he could not look away from.

"You okay?" Casey asked tentatively.

No response. Of course not. Just because Raph had asked Casey for help didn't mean things were okay between them. It just meant Raph had no one else to turn to. And that, above anything else, made Casey Jones grieve the most.

If silence had a source, it was Raphael.

When Leo burst into the lair, Donatello was standing in the middle of the living room and talking on the phone, his consonants over-enunciated and syllables rolling with urgency. Mike was pacing furiously in front of him, and Splinter stood motionless nearby. Leo strode to Mike, who glanced up as he approached.

"April's saying Raph's run off," he said bitterly, "but Don's not giving us anything else. They've been talking for like ten minutes." He moved to start his pacing again, but Leo clamped a hand to his shoulder and forced him to maintain eye contact.

"If he with her?" he asked sharply.

"Hell if I know."

"I want to talk to her."

There was a plastic click. Leo glanced at Don, who had just hung up his phone. Donatello closed his eyes and took a deep, slow breath, and Leo's grip on Mikey's shoulder tightened anxiously. Three pairs of eyes were on Don as he turned to them and gave a weary sigh.

"She says Raph and Casey took off somewhere together, but she won't say where."

Leo frowned sharply. "Raph and *Casey?* "

"Why--?" began Mikey.

A sudden hand gesture from Splinter silenced them both. "Tell everything, Donatello." The rat sensei stood like a statue, still, with restrained power and a cold, chiseled look of reserved judgment.

Don shook his head softly. "I kept asking her questions, but that's what it boils down to. Everything else was just…her avoiding my

questions. Apparently Raph showed up and asked Casey to drive him somewhere. That's it."

"Is she with them?" asked Leo.

"No, they're alone."

"Does she know why?"

"I don't know."

Leo snatched the phone from Don's hand, prepared to dial April's number and ask her his own questions before he heard the massive crack of snapping wood. His head snapped around. Splinter was swinging his staff, cracked in half, at a vase on an end table. The sound of shattering porcelain crackled through the air, and with a shove, Splinter knocked over the end table and walked briskly to his room. Leo stared after his father, stunned, the phone lying forgotten in his hand. There was a breathless moment when the air seemed to have been vacuumed from the room; then, quietly, Donatello moved in to pick up the table.

"I'll start cleaning this up," he volunteered softly.

The rest of the long drive to Northampton was silent. Casey glaned toward Raph every now and then. The teen continued to stare out the window, shoulders tense in the posture he had when he didn't want to talk, watching the sky lighten from black to grey-blue. The pre-dawn light darkened his skin to a deep green-grey and reflected a glimmer of smoky blue in his dark eyes. He never looked at Casey.

As soon as they arrived at the farmhouse, Raph opened his door and stepped out, slamming it behind him. He headed straight for the barn. Casey watched him, feeling a little displaced. He was supposed to be at work. Instead, he'd driven all night into the middle of nowhere. Now he needed to keep an eye on Raph. No time for

sleep. Not when he was being a pal. He shuffled out of the truck and padded after Raph.

Raphael wouldn't come to him unless he felt he had nowhere else to turn. Things were probably bad at the lair. Mike had said Raph wasn't allowed out. That would make Raph crazy, if nothing else did first. So Raph had sneaked out. Come to the one place he could that wasn't home and asked for a change of scenery. This had nothing to do with Raph's feelings about Casey. Raph still hated him, and Casey didn't blame him. No, this was about Raph *needing* Casey. No one else in the world, not even his brothers, could understand Raph as instinctively as Casey. Raph simply couldn't go to anyone else. It wasn't a choice.

Casey could hear grunts and dull thuds coming from the barn as he approached. Inside the barn, Raph, red-eyed from sleep deprivation, pummeled the punching bag like it had hit his dog with its car on purpose. The ninja huffed and puffed and gritted his teeth and growled and hit and hit and hit and kicked and punched and Casey could feel the blood singing through his own veins, knowing how it felt.

But Raph was frustrated. He looked frustrated, and Casey would be frustrated if he were Raph. The punching bag wasn't a person. It couldn't feel, it couldn't hurt, it couldn't fight back. Raph didn't need to hit things. Raph needed to *fight.*

"Think fast!" Casey barked, and with no other warning, launched himself at Raph. The turtle whirled around and kicked him in the chest, knocking the wind out of him and sending him flying backwards. Casey swung to his feet just in time to dodge a low kick and took a swing at Raph's jaw. They fought, their frustrations ebbing with the pain they dealt and the pain they took, brains twirling under the influence of endorphins and adrenaline. Casey pulled few punches. Raph pulled none.

The fight ended when Raph slammed Casey into a wooden post and doubled him over with a punch to the gut. Casey dropped to his

knees, breathless, one hand pressing to the dusty earth for support and the other raised in surrender. To his surprise, Raph ceased immediately and sat on the ground, drawing his knees up and draping his arms over them, breathing heavily to cool his body. Just by looking at him, Casey could tell that the fight had done him a world of good, and would probably continue to do so. Part of Raph's depression was undoubtedly due to an utter lack of exercise—why hadn't Don thought of this?

"Feel better?" Casey asked as he regained his breath. It was a little risky, venturing a conversational question, but Raph obviously didn't want to kill him anymore. At least, he was resisting if he did.

No response from the turtle. Raph simply stared ahead, eyes less glazed than before, but still haunted.

Casey shrugged. "Well. Maybe we should do that more often. I mean, if not, I'm cool with that."

Still no response.

The vigilante watched the turtle for a moment, weighing his next words carefully. He was not used to walking on eggshells, especially not with Raph. But not only were he and Raphael not on the best of terms, but Raphael was on the verge of plunging off the deep end. He would have to learn tact quickly. "Uh. April's gonna be bringin' up some of our beer. Be here in a few hours. Whatcha say you go get some sleep, an' tonight, we'll drink ourselves under the table?"

Raph frowned a little, a spark of anger lighting in his eyes. A tiny whirl of hope flared in Casey's chest. Anger was an improvement. Anger was better than numbness. If Raph was indignant that Casey was being too familiar too soon, Casey was okay with that. "No thanks," the ninja said hoarsely, the first words he'd spoken since they had left the apartment.

Casey shrugged again. "Well, the beer's always open. But I dunno 'bout you, but I'm zonkin' out right here." He pushed himself to his

feet and stretched, yawning hugely. "I'm goin' ta bed. You comin'?"

The turtle hesitated, then pushed down on his knees, rising to his feet.

When they arrived at the house, Raph brushed past Casey and made straight for the master bedroom, where he slammed the door behind him. Casey sank onto the couch, well in sight of the bedroom door, and stretched out over it. Learning to walk on eggshells would be hard enough. As his eyelids drooped, he wondered if he could learn to sleep lightly as well.

When Leo called April the first time, she said no more than she had told Don. When he called a little later, unable to keep his anxious hands from dialing her number, her phone rang once before going to her voice mail. An hour later, he was still sitting at the kitchen table, staring at the phone in his hands, waiting for the moment when he would give in to his worry and call her again. He turned the phone in his hands, using its surface design as a feeble distraction. It was only a matter of time before the temptation became too great, even though he knew that April would answer no more questions than before.

More distracting than the surface of the cell phone was the presence of Mike, who had been leaning against a cabinet and staring at him for the past few minutes, obviously trying to work himself up to saying something. The occasional glance at his youngest brother revealed a dark face, that strained look of anger Mike had when he was desperate to say something scathing and couldn't think of anything sufficient.

Go ahead, Mikey, Leo thought, staring at his phone. *I know what you want to say. It doesn't matter. Saying it out loud won't change anything. I'm just glad you're finally getting mad.*

Mike finally broke the silence. "What did you do?"

Not the scathing remark Leo was expecting, but he wasn't surprised that Mike finally decided to reserve some judgment until he had some of the story. "I killed House."

"Where?"

"In the sewers. Raph was holding him captive not too far from here."

"Was Raph there?"

"I didn't realize it until after, but yes."

"So he flipped out and left." There was more than a note of bitterness in Mike's voice now.

Leo's focus on his phone broke briefly when his eyes flickered up to Mike's. "Yes, Mikey. He flipped out and left."

The darkness on Mike's face deepened. "So it's your fault," he accused.

Leo leaned back in his chair, relaxing into as casual a pose as possible. It was his way of dealing with inevitable arguments—acting like the argument meant little to him was absolutely infuriating to the rest of his brothers, and made them more likely to slip up and lose, especially in cases like this, when Leo knew there was no other way for him to win. "I think this has been coming for a long time, Mikey. Raph's only been getting more and more frustrated since the attack —"

"Shut up, Leo," snarled Mike. "If it weren't for you and Don smothering him, this wouldn'ta happened."

Leo's focus on Mike intensified. "What about your pitying and babying? 'Oh Raph, so sorry you were attacked. Here, let's watch *The Princess Bride* !'"

"Fuck you, Leo," snapped Mike, turning to leave. "You know I'm right." Before Leo could say another word, Mike was bounding

across the living room and up the stairs.

Leo watched him. *Yes, I know you're right. But I know I'm right, too, Michelangelo. We have all killed Raphael.*

Chapter 13

Donatello had run out of things to fix. The remote now had special batteries that would last its lifetime. The television had been replaced with a refurbished high-definition masterpiece. Every one of his brothers, including the absent Raph, now had a customized laptop that could access wireless Internet from the middle of the Atlantic. Every gadget on and in the van had been tweaked within an inch of its life. He still wasn't finished.

Practically speaking, there was nothing left to do. If Don were in a practical mood, he would leave things alone and take a break. Watch television with Mike. Practice his katas. Take a shower to get the crick out of his neck. Somehow, though, he knew that such leisure would drive him insane. He needed to fix things. He needed to be useful. He needed to make up for something he could never make up for—something he could not fix.

Now he had run out of things to do. He hadn't run out of ideas—that was impossible, to him. But now he lay on the couch and stared at the ceiling simply because it was a change of scenery from lying on his bed staring at the ceiling of his bedroom. There was nothing he could do now that would make him feel any different once the project was finished. He couldn't make his brothers whole until he himself was whole. He lay on the couch and pondered how to fix himself.

Lying on the floor was a deflated soccer ball Mike hadn't bothered to throw away. Don's eyes rested on it like idle dragonflies, staring from under the edges of his top eyelids, through the half-moon shape of his vision. After a moment, he propped himself up on one elbow and squinted at it. He could fix that. Re-inflate it. Patch it up. Lazily, he rolled off the couch, feeling rather light, and picked up the damaged toy.

It took less than half an hour to place a clear seal on the hole that had popped the ball and fill it with air. It was more than Mike would

have done. Mike would have patched it with duct tape. The toy already showed his brother's marks—doodles with colorful markers of superhero logos and stickers for various bands randomly placed. Duct tape would have covered some of the personalization. Maybe this was why Mike hadn't thrown it away. His room was full of random little artistic things, like models of starships and a chess set he had carved himself, its figures modeled after people he knew (Don was the white rook, opposite Baxter Stockman on the black side). Those chess pieces, on further thought, spoke well of how Mike thought of those around him. Raph was the white knight.

Don was rarely artistic himself, and when he was, Mike said he was too deep. Art soothed him nonetheless, and helped him express things his inventions lacked the vocabulary for. Perhaps a sort of personal creative outlet was a coping method for Mike just like Don's inventions were for him. Considering how poorly his current method was working for him, Don wondered if it might not be a bad idea to try Mike's tactic.

He blinked at the soccer ball, and the added colors vanished, showing him the geometric patterns on the sphere, an ocean of white with islands of black, and inspiration struck.

Raph wasn't sure how he had come to be alive at the moment. His plans had stopped already, as he was supposed to have been dead last night. A moment of hesitation had come, of all times, when Casey had mentioned April bringing beer—which she had, thank God. But instead of drinking himself to death, Raph sat on the roof with a bottle and nursed it slowly, just as his eyes drank up the view of earth and sky surrounding him. He hadn't managed to get alone except to sleep. Even now, Casey was sitting on the same rooftop, some feet away, taking in the view with a beer of his own. Neither had spoken since coming up here, Casey uninvited, and Raphael was able to sift through his own thoughts without intruding conversation.

He had needed to think for so long.

Everything that could have gone wrong since the night a few Purple Dragons had taken him hostage had gone wrong. Raph would rather have been killed than ravaged. He would rather his family never known. Revenge hadn't even been his—it had been Leo's. He was a child of Murphy's Law. It was nuts.

He turned his head a little and studied Casey out of his peripheral vision. The man didn't need to see him standing up. He wouldn't reach him in time if Raph decided to take a tumble from the rooftop. An image of dying with someone gaping at him flashed before his eyes, and a fire was kindled in the pit of his stomach as his lips drew back in disgust. The idea was so bitter he could taste it in his mouth, swallow it and feel it burn. Casey would not be there for his final moments. If there was a thing about his life that he could still choose, he would choose death in solitude.

The back of his mind played, in black and white and muffled sound, his family's reaction to his death. It was different from before. Casey was bringing him home, and since the man had called to report the news, there was no sickening shock. There were tears and grief amidst the black-and-white clips and flashes of the colors of his brothers' masks, but every one of them, especially Leo, was more devastated by his own failure than by the death of their wayward brother. They needed to move on from this. Raph could never do the same; therefore, he was holding them back. They needed him to die.

But he couldn't do it now. Not with Casey. The beer was pleasantly bitter and reminiscent of past contentment, and combined with the weather would have made for a perfect day to die in peace. But Raphael could not die in front of Casey.

If need required it, Raphael would live another day.

Fingers dug into his biceps, and pain rocketed up and down his arms. Suddenly, he was reeling from being shoved against a car, his hands slapping against the metal before it could make contact with his face. Someone pressed against him from behind, forcing him

harder against the vehicle, smashing his face against the dull red paint. Loud laughter crackled behind him, and when he glanced back, House's face filled his field of vision.

This is another dream .

But the shame was real when House took his turn, and his lip split against the cold metal of the car. The stick of sweaty flesh against sweaty flesh and harsh storm of breath against his ear felt real enough. Panic lit his face and chest afire, and he shoved backward to buck House off him. House laughed and slammed him even harder against the car, continuing with renewed fervor. A scream, distant and quiet and nowhere near as relieving as it should have been, sounded somewhere in his ears—his own scream, which his own breath could not quite expel. He tried again, bellowing with all his might, with the same result in addition to a strange sensation, more physical than anything he had felt up till now.

When Leonardo woke up in bed, he was choking on nothing.

He gasped, and cool air flooded his lungs. He blinked hard, clearing his eyes of the sight of the hood of the car, and clenched his teeth to hold back the scream he knew would satisfy the residual desires from the dream. Tense as a bound spring, he flipped the covers away and climbed out of his low bed, the touch of the cold floor on his feet cooling his overheated body as he padded to his door.

Light leaked out from under Donatello's door, and acting on the skim of his emotions, Leo approached it and knocked. He wondered what time it was. Don was usually up fairly late compared to Leonardo.

"Come in," called a quiet voice.

Leo pushed the door open to find Don hovering over, of all things, a papier-mâché globe, about eighteen inches wide, with black continents and white oceans. Leo hadn't seen such a project since they had been children. "Ah—that's…"

Don didn't even glance at him, but dipped another white strip into a jar of flour paste and pressed it against the globe. "It's just an idea I had. No mockery necessary."

"I wasn't going to mock," Leo protested, the horror of the dream still lingering in the air around him. He approached his brother, and as he came closer, he could see that there were words on the slips of paper Don was using for his project—black words on the white paper, white words on the black, some large, some tiny, some bold and some slender. Each land mass was a mixed conglomeration of thoughts, and each body of water was a sea of the vocabulary of the past weeks.

*Control Anger resentment **TIME** strange weird Thankless Care dark DISASTER Power resigned **Fall** helpless…*

Leo tore his eyes from the dizzying hive of words and stared at his brother. "Art?"

Don nodded, planting another strip—a black strip with the word "can't" in white—against a slowly forming Eurasia. "I'm trying something different."

Leo sank down to sit on Don's bed, still watching his brother, interest piqued. "Different from…?"

"From all the mechanical things I've been doing. I thought if I tried something a little more expressive, I could get my own thoughts organized." Don shuffled through a few scraps of paper on the desk, as if looking for just the right one. "I can't help anyone until I do, really. I…have dreams, Leo."

Leo's fingertips went cold. "Dreams?"

Don nodded, fingers idly sorting through the papers. "About Raph dying, usually. Sometimes I'm back in the bathroom with him just after he was rescued, and he gets toxic shock. Sometimes Raph's committing suicide, and I can only watch. I…actually woke up from

one about two hours ago. Decided to work on this until I could sleep again."

Leo was not even tempted to reveal his own recurring nightmares.

Donatello finally looked up at him. "You might try something like this, Leo. It really helps."

Feeling suddenly uncomfortable, Leo pushed himself to his feet. "I'm fine," he muttered as he walked briskly out the door.

He'd lost track of how many days he had been here.

April came and went sometimes, to bring groceries. Otherwise, his only companion was a quiet, unobtrusive Casey. Unobtrusive, at least, in the sense that he rarely spoke except about topics low in intimacy such as what they would eat for dinner. Otherwise, Casey seemed to be everywhere. When Raphael found himself staring too intently into the snow-peaked rapids of the river, Casey suddenly appeared, mentioning some excuse or another to divert him. Even when Raph thought he was alone with his thoughts, Casey would give himself away with a breath taken too loudly, a misstep, a trickle of wind blowing in the wrong direction.

I get the idea, Casey. You're not gonna let me kill myself. I'm not stupid .

The knowledge was infuriating, but in some distant way, it quelled the same fire it kindled. Casey wasn't going to let him die. All this time, when they had never talked about that night, or Raph's behavior, or his mental state, and when Casey had given him minimal strange looks, Casey had been careful not to let his friend end his life. It was less like having a babysitter and more like having a spotter, who kept him from falling no matter how much he wanted to.

It was better than what he'd gotten from his brothers, at least.

Once, the sudden intrusion caused Raph to snap, and when his vision cleared, Casey was lying flat on the ground, reeling from a blow Raphael could not remember dealing. Ashamed, Raph helped him to his feet and muttered an apology and added the incident to the number of reasons he needed to die.

But as the days went on and so did he, he found himself slipping into a pattern each day. Mornings would be spent attacking the punching bag in the barn for hours before eating a thing. A bowl of cereal for lunch, then an afternoon of wandering the area. At first, this wandering ritual had come about as a way to seek solitude. Now, Raph simply took in the sights and sounds he had been starved of in New York—the way the sunlight dappled the trees in many shades of green, the bell-like tinkle and sparkle of water, the high, hollow sounds of birdsong, the flash of bright feathers against green and brown, and the crunch of fragrant dead leaves on the forest floor. Not a single section of the forest looked the same as any other, but the smells were the same, the clean air and damp bark, free of any trace of the car exhaust that was so thick in New York that he thought he could chew it. It was a purely sensory experience, and didn't reach far beneath the skin, but it was better than the sewers.

He would return in the evenings to find dinner ready, usually a frozen crock pot meal Casey had put on that morning, and after eating, he would watch movies and drink beer until he fell asleep on the couch. Every time he woke, he would find himself covered in a blanket he hadn't touched himself. After a few nights of this, he started covering himself with the blanket as soon as he lay on the couch, pre-empting Casey's sentimentality.

Raph lived these days untouched by his surroundings. The woods that had once mystified him now served as soulless diversion, idly viewed through fogged glass. Stars became dots, and birdsong became sounds, not unpleasant, but more or less unremarkable.

The loss of passion didn't make him want to die more. It made him want it back.

It was a creeping realization. The more time went on and the longer he lived, the more his suicide fantasies mingled with fantasies of what things would have been like if that night had never occurred, or fantasies of returning home to find that things had gone back to normal. He would accept that--Leo nagging about little things, Don drifting in the long cotton clouds of daydreams, Mikey abandoning care and tact in favor of good times and laughter. He even dreamed about playing video games with Casey again, although his mind still could not venture with his friend out into the dark streets. That would take time.

Time.

Since when had he started thinking of time? Of a time when everything in the past months had no bearing on his daily life, and he could be content? When this trial had turned into strength of character for himself and his family? The only time he'd thought of such a time existing, it had seemed like wishful thinking. Now, he dreamed of it. He dreamed of living.

There was a knock at the door, and Mike hurled a pillow at it. He did not want to talk to anyone, especially not Leo, and there was a ninety-five percent chance that the knocker was Leo.

"Michelangelo, you've been in there since this morning. Are you planning on eating?"

Yep, it was Leo, and Mike knew for a fact that Leo had seen him emerge from his room to collect and hoard various food and drink items. He might have been setting up camp in his room, with his stash of food on one side of the bed and himself sitting on the other end with his laptop on his knees, playing an online role-playing game like a fiend. He wasn't going to starve, and he wouldn't have to talk to anyone.

"Michelangelo, get out of there NOW!"

He sounded impatient. Mike ignored him. His zombie warlock was just a few kills from level fifty-eight, and these little beasties didn't even give that much experience. Thing was, there were gazillions of the little things swamping him, and while each individual did very little damage, the fact that there were gazillions of them meant he was losing hit points fast—

There was a crash, and Mike's vision involuntarily focused on the door skidding across his bedroom floor. It stopped after a good six inches, and his eyes swerved to the side, where Leo stood in the doorway with steam coming out of his ears.

"Michelangelo," Leo said precisely, his voice quiet with restrained fury. "You. Will. Come. To dinner."

Mike glanced back at his computer and continued attacking the little critters swarming over his character. Leo stormed in front of him and slammed the laptop shut, nearly closing Mike's fingers in before the indignant gamer jerked his hands back. "Leo!"

Leo shoved the computer to the side and grabbed Mike's arm, fingers digging into his bicep. "You are going to eat dinner with your family," he snarled, then forced Michelangelo upward.

In automatic reaction to being so handled, Mike jerked back, the force of Leo's pull not quite letting him sit down no matter how hard he fought. He raised a foot to hook behind his brother's knees and topple him, but Leo's hand caught the foot, then his arm hooked to capture both ankles. With both feet together, Mike kicked fiercely at Leo's plastron and succeeded in making him stumble backwards, but his older brother still had his arm in a viselike grip. Mike snapped his arm towards Leo's thumb to break his grip, but succeeded only in bruising his own arm. "Let—me—go!" he shouted.

Leo threw his weight forward and pinned Mike to the bed, knees on his plastron. Mike struggled to bring his knees up and shove his brother off, but then Leo had him in a headlock and was groping underneath his arm. A sharp intake of breath hissed through Mike's

teeth as he recognized a trick Leo used to use when they were kids, and he slammed his elbow against his plastron, closing his arm to Leo. Leonardo, however, had just managed to find a fold of soft, sensitive flesh, and pinched it hard between his large, strong fingers. Mike struggled wildly, this time to cause the painful grip on his underarm to slip rather than to force his brother off, but his struggling only twisted the skin further, and he cried out.

The calm in Leonardo's voice surpassed all reason. "Michelangelo."

"Okay!" Mike choked spitefully, refusing to let his brother finish. "Just let me go!"

But Leo was high on power now, and was too sharp not to notice that Mike hadn't actually made a promise. "You will come to dinner. Understand?"

That was too much to ask. "Go fuck yourself."

Leo pressed him further, leaning in and twisting the flesh between his fingers. "You will come to dinner. Understand?"

It was a horrible thing to say, but at the moment, Mike wanted to hurt Leo as much as Leo was hurting him, and so he took out his last weapon. "This is why Raph left!"

It had the desired effect. Leo's hand suddenly left Mike's underarm, and both hands were now pressing Mike's shoulders into the mattress. "What?" he asked dangerously.

"Let me go," snarled Mike. This had already been more conversation than he'd wanted.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN?" Leo shouted in his face, the black pit in the center of his dark eyes no larger than a pinprick.

"I mean let me up." Michelangelo knew this cheek wouldn't help him, but it felt good.

"TELL ME, MICHELANGELO."

Suddenly, Mike was glad to obey. "You fucking smothered him, he couldn't breathe, and you just HAD to interfere with House, you just HAD to do everything for him—"

"YOU HAVE NO DEFENSE, Mikey." Leo pressed him further into the mattress. "You are JUST AS RESPONSIBLE."

"Why, Leo? 'Cause I treated him like he was still my brother and not my hospital ward patient?"

"You just had a different treatment plan, Mikey. You don't get off blaming just me."

"Oh!" Mike could feel his own eyes light up. "Oh, I don't, Leo. I blame those motherfuckers for doing this to him, and yes, Casey for leaving him, and House for messing him up more. I just blame you most."

The iron grip on his shoulders suddenly tightened, and before Mike could tell what was happening, he was reeling from being lifted and slammed hard into the mattress. Twice. Three times, and Leo struck him across the face with a cry of rage. Mike's eyes watered from the sting. "You little BRAT!" shouted Leo.

Suddenly the grip vanished, and Mike could see the ceiling again. The oppressive weight of his brother on top of him vanished, and Mike sat up quickly to see his brother storming toward the door. Leo stopped just before exiting and whipped around to snarl, "STAY here, then. I don't fucking WANT you at dinner, and neither does anyone else if you're like this!"

Then Leo was gone, and a breathless Mike went back to his game to find that he had been killed by a hundred little creatures with a tenth of his power. The computer was shoved recklessly to the floor, and for the lack of a pillow, he wadded up a corner of blanket and buried his still-stinging face in it. Maybe it would help the stinging in his eyes, as well.

He hated it when things got quiet. It was in those times that he knew just what he had done to make Raph leave.

If he stood out on the edge of the front porch, Casey got a bar of reception on his cell phone. It was a balancing act, but at least he could prove that the outside world still existed. It had been a little over two weeks since he and Raph had come here, and Casey had to let his boss know that yes, he was coming back and no, he did not have an attitude problem and no, he was not trying to get fired. By the end of the conversation, Casey was dead certain his job would not be there when he got back to New York.

He stared out toward the dark woods, trying to get his mind off his inevitable unemployment. It was worth it if he could help Raph. That was not in question. It was just another consequence of his stupid actions that night. He missed April. He wondered if she had picked out a dog like they'd been talking about. His phone was ringing. His mother was probably ten feet out the door on her way to see him.

His phone was ringing.

Snapping back to reality, he opened the phone and held it to his ear with a deep intake of breath. "Hey."

"Casey?" It was Splinter.

Oh geez, I'm dead. He is going to chew me out, then he's gonna hunt me down and rip me to shreds. I am so dead. "S—Master Splinter. Uh…"

There came a sigh from the other end of the line. "I am glad to have finally got hold of you. I will not keep you long, but I have been meaning to ask this of you."

The situation felt a little unreal, and without thinking, Casey nodded. It didn't occur to him that Splinter couldn't see him nod until after the rat was already speaking again. "Raphael…you know that he is not

himself, and it has been…difficult for me to be apart from him during this time. He needs his father."

"He—" Casey glanced back into the house, running a hand through his hair self-consciously, afraid Raph may be listening. The turtle was fastened to the television, vacant-eyed as he had been for the past two weeks. "He'd flip out if I told you, y'know—"

"I am not asking to come to him. Casey, I need you…to be what I cannot be any longer. My eyes. My hands and feet. Care for him as I would. I cannot…"

The old sensei trailed off, and Casey felt his throat tying itself into hard, awkward knots. Swallowing did not alleviate the pain, and he found himself pressing his fingertips into his eyes to stop the threatening onslaught. "Yeah, I can do that."

"Please…protect him, Casey. Do not let him…"

"Way ahead of ya, Splinter." Casey took a deep breath and raised his head, dropping his hand away from his face. "I got 'im. He's fine with me."

"Thank you, Casey." Splinter did not sound completely relieved, and now that things were complete, a note of awkwardness entered his voice. "Keep him safe."

"Sure. I'll…talk to ya later."

"I hope so."

Casey's eyes slid shut as he closed the phone. A weight had been taken off him now that Splinter was at least willing to talk to him. But Splinter's trust was the same as Raph's—only there because he had no choice. Awkwardly shoving the phone into his pocket, Casey shuffled back into the house.

The evening passed like any other, only this time, Raphael's body language did not actively cut out Casey's existence on the couch as they watched video tapes of old movies. The house was too far from civilization to receive cable, but there were still videotapes from some years ago of old Westerns and Alfred Hitchcock films. Raph had been watching them every night until he fell asleep. Casey didn't mind. At least Raph was coping instead of trying to kill himself.

Raph surprised Casey by speaking, his voice quiet from lack of use. "Case?"

Casey nearly jumped out of his skin. He blinked at his friend, briefly wondering if he had hallucinated his name. "Yyyyeah?"

Raph never took his wide eyes off the television. He looked very tense, leaning forward against his knees, his fingers twitching as though he were trying not to clench his hands into fists. Silence hung in the air for every tick of a minute, broken only by sudden deep breaths and soft, explosive throat-clearing. "I…"

When the silence started again, Casey decided a small prompt was in order. "S'okay, Raph. Go ahead."

Raph clicked his teeth together, then muttered, "'S gonna be hard tonight."

For a second, Casey didn't have any idea what Raph was talking about. Then, his eyes widened.

Raph cleared his throat nervously and continued. "I don't…think I needa be alone. It's just…"

He's giving me a clue. He's helping me keep him from doing something.

Nothing could measure the height to which Casey's heart leapt. A small smile cracked his lips apart. "Yeah. Sure thing, Raph. We

can…we can bunk up upstairs. There's a couple beds up there, an' we can lock the windows."

Raph bobbed his head and looked a little relieved, but still very tense. He let out a long stream of air. "'Kay. Thanks."

"No problem." Casey's smile spread into a full-fledged grin, and he gave Raph a light punch on the arm. "You're doin' good, man. Keep it up."

It was so small that it might have been a trick played by shadows, but for the rest of his life, Casey would testify that Raphael smiled.

Chapter 14

There was as much congealed white paste on Don's fingers as there was on his project. He wiped a white strip with the black word "erased" clean of flour so that the word could be seen clearly. Before, he had been able to use his thumb. Now, he used a white rag, since using his digits only smeared the paste. A bucket of cloudy water stood abandoned nearby. Don had forgotten he had put it there to wash his hands every now and then. Mike might say he was in "the zone." Whatever was happening, he felt on the verge of a breakthrough. The words were making too much sense, saying too clearly what was happening to him, and as irrational as it was, he wanted to pursue them, to chase them to whatever conclusion they knew and he didn't. Hundreds of different words, different fonts, different concentrations of blots of ink and toner, some white, some newspaper-grey, some sleek and black from the pages of a magazine, all telling him what his world had been since this started. He didn't hold back, didn't lie to himself. If he felt the word, it went on the globe.

RAPE *criminal* open Pinned *unloved* overlooked **couldn't** heal *Dark LIFE* listless **TERROR** covenant *CANCER* **ungrateful** concubine Cannibal *UNDERDOG* Don't thankless **Freak** *frightened* black…

He wished Mike were here to help him.

A sleepless Splinter was in the kitchen making tea when Leo arrived, blinking remnants of his nightmare from his eyes. Their eyes met briefly, and Leo wondered uncomfortably for a moment if those dark depths were aware of what he saw in his increasingly disturbing dreams. *Fire within trees, air and water and the vacuum of space, neon lights and a gritty alley, Father. Do you know what I have done in my dreams as well?*

Splinter motioned for him to sit at the table. "I have wanted to speak with you, Leonardo."

Leo sank wearily into a chair, eyes trailing to the teapot as Splinter took a second cup from a cupboard. Ginger tea. It wasn't his favorite. "Yes, sensei?"

Splinter filled both teacups, one after the other. "It is nothing you have done, my son. I...need to ease my own heart."

"Yes, sensei." Leo had always been honored to be Splinter's confidante when he needed one, but felt underqualified at the moment. There were so many things on his mind, so many things he needed to sort out that he couldn't possibly help his father.

Splinter placed a cup before him and sat opposite, warming his hands against his own mug. "Do you believe Raphael will return to us, Leonardo?"

Leo shifted uncomfortably. "Why do you ask me, sensei?"

"You knew him best, perhaps. What do you believe?"

Raphael was no longer the person he used to be, so how should Leo know? No one seemed to have any hope that he would come back, not even Mikey. If he were to take his cue from the situation, he would say no, but he couldn't give a response like that to someone seeking hope. If his father despaired, his family would have no chance. False hope, on the other hand, wasn't something Leo had ever encouraged. "I...don't know, Father," he said honestly.

Splinter paused, then nodded softly, eyes glinting. "What about my other sons? Will they return?"

Leo blinked. "Sensei?"

"If Raphael does not come back to me, will I still be deprived of the rest of my life's joy?" Splinter held Leo's eyes firmly, unafraid to be

so vulnerable. It was a challenge.

Leo swallowed. "If-if you're talking about Mikey--"

"Not Michelangelo alone, Leonardo. None of my sons speak to their father anymore. They do not speak to each other. They wait for their brother to return. How long will they wait?"

"You...want me to drag Mikey out of his room? I tried--"

"No, Leonardo. I want you to heal yourself. Can you do this?" Still that challenge, those hard and vulnerable eyes.

Leo wet his lips. "I've tried to be the big brother, I've tried to help everyone heal, but no one listens."

"That is because you cannot make anyone heal, Leonardo." Splinter sipped his tea thoughtfully. "That is where you have made your mistake. You wish to force the wound closed with your own hands, and it is only causing more pain. You cannot give healing, Leonardo; healing must be allowed to happen, not forced. You cannot make Michelangelo come out of his room, only give him reason to do so. You cannot ease Donatello's mind with words, but your actions can give him hope. And you cannot take away what happened to Raphael, no matter how you may wish to. You cannot tell him you understand when you do not. You cannot talk him into reason when he has none, and you cannot draw him from the pit, only give him the strength for him to lift himself up. Raphael will find his own healing, and I believe that in leaving us, he has begun to do so."

Leo stared into his tea, a thousand protests falling flat as their reason came down to him. "I…sometimes feel like that would be an insult, as bad as that sounds. Like it would mean…he doesn't need me."

"He needs you." Splinter steepled his fingers and leaned against his elbows on the table. "He needs your brothers. For now, he needs you all to be distant, and able to heal yourselves. Soon, he will need

your presence to remind him that at the end of all this pain, he will still have his life."

Leo swallowed again, trembling slightly. Could Splinter have asked him to do anything more difficult than sit back and watch? His face burned, but he nodded. "I understand, Sensei."

"I believe you do, Leonardo. You have tasted the anger and shame which plague your brother. Your own experiences have caused you to separate from your family before, as he has."

Yes, during that awful few months before and during his first trip to see the Ancient One. Had he put his brothers through *this?* He suppressed a shudder. Had Raphael had nightmares for him? "Sensei?" He fought to speak through his closing throat. "I have… dreams." He wanted to end it there, but there were Splinter's patient eyes, expecting and fathomless, and he told all. "Sometimes I'm him, sometimes I'm watching, and sometimes…"

Splinter coaxed him gently. "Yes?"

Leo drew in a deep, cleansing breath. "Sometimes I'm one of his attackers. Those are the worst ones."

Splinter did not look surprised. "You are desperate to aid your brother, Leonardo. Your mind wishes to understand what happened to him, and believes that when you do, you will understand how to help him. In your sleep, it tries to understand."

"It's not just that. Sometimes I think we all went through what he went through, when it happened to him."

"I believe that, too, my son."

"I don't know if it would have been worse for any of us than it was for Raph."

Splinter nodded hesitantly. "Raphael believes he must work harder than any of you in order to be a good person. The things he believed could make him inherently good were his strength and his ability to protect. Taking these away, Leonardo, caused him to question everything he is. You know what this is like."

"Yes, Sensei."

"Then you know what it takes to heal from it. Give that to him."

"Time, Sensei?"

"Yes. Give him time. And give yourself time."

Four weeks now, since they had come here, and while Raph still wasn't himself, at least he was *somebody* again. Casey sat on the porch and stared out into the woods, his beer hanging between his hands, half-forgotten. Raph wasn't speaking, either, but he wasn't resentfully ignoring Casey—an improvement, by all means. It resembled the companionable silence they'd had before, the moments when the molecules of air that hung between them transmitted that understanding of mutual trust and kinship like an invisible wire. The difference here was that Raph was no longer the same person, and Casey was slowly coming to understand that this change was most likely permanent.

Getting to know the new Raph was already difficult. This Raph had a similar posture to the old one, a little softer, a little less intense and a little tenser. Instead of splaying his legs apart, his feet pointed straight forward and so did his knees. He still leaned forward and rested his elbows against his knees, and his eyes were the same as before, even if they saw a little less. As spacey as he was in conversation, his eyes flickered to any unexpected sound while the rest of his head remained stationary. As little as he paid attention, he was still aware.

Remembering his beer, Casey took a swallow. "Nice day, huh?"

The response was minimal. Raphael bobbed his head. That was what he did nowadays, instead of nodding. It was a series of nods that tapered off instead of stopping. It seemed very noncommittal for Raph, who before had always been passionate about *everything* .

He would be rebuilt.

Casey stared into the neck of his bottle. "Damn gorgeous out here. Wanted to take April out here on her birthday. Go campin'. Ask 'er ta marry me." He glanced over at Raph. "Her birthday's in less than a week, an' I didn't even think about it till just now."

"I won't tell her." Raph's voice was deep and solemn, but the corner of his mouth shifted, his eye twitching in what might have been the beginnings of a wink.

It was the first joke he'd come up with in two months, and Casey was too relieved by it not to laugh. The snort caused Raph's premature smile to grow a little, a mere tightening of the lips. "Thanks, man."

"You're welcome." Raph's smile faded, and he absently swirled his beer in the bottle. The silence began again, but Raph continued to swirl the beer. It was a good way to make the beverage go flat. The only reason Casey could think of for such a motion was anxiety, but since he still felt like he was on thin ice with Raph, he resisted asking him what the problem was.

After a few minutes of the silence, Raphael spoke again. "You should do it."

Casey's heart spiked, startled, and he glanced sharply at Raphael. "What? The thing with April?"

"Yeah." Raph shrugged. "Why not?"

Casey frowned, but his chest fluttered with hope. "You mean…you'd be okay with that? With her comin' here an' us doin' our thing?"

"Casey," Raph said softly, his voice croaking slightly, "I been thinkin'…since we got ambushed, everyone's life stopped. Because a' me. Everyone's tryin' a' help me get better, an' I just think everyone needs ta get on with it an' let me get on with it. An' you an' April…you're perfect for each other. We been wondering when you were gonna pop the question for ages now, an' it's about time you did it. That shouldn't change because a' me."

Casey was slowly nodding, but his heart sank. "You think you'll be okay on your own? While we're out an' stuff?"

"I'll…I mean, I can't promise you nothin', I dunno what I'll be like that day, but I'd be worse if you changed your plans 'cause a' me."

"I ain't leavin' you alone, man."

"Casey," Raph said patiently, "I ain't gonna kill myself."

Casey stared at him. This was new.

"I don't…I don't think I ever really wanted ta die, anyway. I wanted things ta go back ta normal. Ta…see the end a' this. Know it wasn't gonna be my whole life for the rest a' my life. An' when I thought that couldn't happen, I thought I'd rather be dead. But…I dunno."

Raph paused, then took a long drink of beer. "Good beer," he said with a degree of satisfaction.

"So you're okay with bein' on your own?" Casey double-checked.

"I ain't gonna kill myself. That's all I can say. Maybe it'd be good for me, bein' *actually* alone 'stead a' havin' you hoverin' everywhere I go."

Casey winced. Raph had noticed that, had he? "Sorry, man."

Raph waved it off with his hand. "Nah. I'm glad ya did it. Kept me from doin' shit to myself. Started gettin' me thinkin' about…movin' on." Those deep, unfathomable eyes stared at the ground, green

legs swinging slightly as they dangled over the edge of the porch. "You're gonna marry April, an' I'll…do the things I've always done. Figure out my life. Where I'm goin'."

It was only later that Casey considered Raphael's concerns about where he was going, and wondered if it meant the ninja had no intention of returning to his family.

The world had made more sense since his talk with Splinter, but its chaos remained untouched. Seeing his family in a clearer light hadn't helped Leonardo reach them. Don was still walled up in his room making his own sense, and Mike has imprisoned himself in his own to block out sense. The lair was so quiet.

If things continued this way, Mike would become as messed up as Raph. And Leo didn't think he could lose two brothers.

There was no knock, only the snick of a latch as Mike's door opened. He almost didn't notice. At the least, he didn't care very much. If Leo wanted to harass him again, he would have to wait until Mike was done with this level. Even then, the safe haven of a totally blank mind was not something Mike was willing to abandon easily. Maybe if he pretended to be engrossed enough not to notice him, Leo would just go away.

The screen of his laptop tilted down and closed with a snick. Mike blinked in surprise. A furred and bluntly clawed hand was holding the laptop closed. He followed the familiar wrist and arm up a soft brown sleeve with his eyes until he found the drawn face of his sensei. He suddenly felt ashamed. Splinter did not look angry or disappointed, only saddened and a little worried. It was the look he got when he was dead sure he knew what you were going through and couldn't altogether blame you, but had no intention of letting you keep hiding in your room playing online role-playing games.

Splinter's fingertips idly moved over the surface of the laptop. "Has this helped you find your answers yet, Michelangelo?"

Oh no. Ohhhh no. He was doing the "you can't look away from me" thing. It worked every time. The old rat held Mike's eyes with his own, refusing to release him. All the years of gentle patience and nurturing, firm discipline and strict training, and above all, endless, devoted love, came out of those eyes. Mike suddenly wanted to break down, burst into tears and fling himself into the arms of his father. "No," he choked, unable to look away.

"What in this room has helped you, then?"

"Nothing." The gaze became unbearable, and Mike tried to tear his eyes away. Splinter's hand reached out and gently held his chin. It was a most tender caress. Mike's eyes stung, and involuntarily filled with water.

"My spirited son," Splinter murmured. "Such solitude was once something you feared." He cupped Mike's face in both hands. "Do you seek to punish yourself?"

No, no, no, no, no, even as he denied it the question struck true. If he left his room, he would only find scorn and emptiness. Isolation was an easier punishment than rejection, in some ways, and if he stayed in there long enough, Leo might decide he'd been made miserable enough that he was punished enough, and would forgive him. *Oh god, I'm so stupid. Is that what this has all been about?* Every little guilt, everything he'd numbed himself to hide from, imploded and crushed, and burst in his mind like too many fireworks set off at once, and he slumped against Splinter's touch, tears raining down his face.

"It's my fault." His voice trembled.

Splinter placed a finger against Mike's lips. "Crying will waste water, Michelangelo. You have had nothing to drink for most of the day. Come with me."

And that was it. In a matter of moments, with nothing but a few sentences and paternal tenderness, Splinter had Mike doing what Leo couldn't brutally force him into. In the kitchen, Splinter poured Mike a glass of water and made him sit down at the table to drink it. He would not let him talk until he drained two glasses. Mike sipped the water quietly; he had been overheated too many times not to know the consequences of drinking too fast while dehydrated. How long had it been since his last glass of water? Water over the past two weeks had been his enemy. Food and water meant having to come out of his room to relieve himself. They meant having to come out of his room to get them in the first place. Maybe, on a subconscious level, it has been another way to punish himself. That was messed up.

When the water was drained, Splinter filled the glass again and caught Mike's eye. "Now. What is your fault?"

Mike dodged his sensei's gaze and stared into his glass. "I...I didn't...I fucked up with Raph. He left 'cause...I mean, I tried, but..." He swallowed, trying to loosen the knot in his throat.

Splinter reached across and took his face in his hand again, gently bringing their eyes to meet. "To my eyes, you were doing better with him than either Donatello or Leonardo. Do you truly believe this is your fault?"

"I...I don't know. I mean, Leo says it is, and I'm sick of fighting with him. If it needs to be someone's fault, I'll to it, I just want things to go back--" His voice caught, his shoulders shook, and he bowed his head to indulge in a few seconds of crying. Raph was good at crying. He was able to do the whole thing where he just sort of squeezed his eyes closed and the tears came out and it looked very manly. Leo's crying face was pretty much the same as his normal face, unless he was *really* emotional, which almost never happened. When Don cried, he got a "what's that smell?" look. Crying with that kind of dignity was a skill Mike had never been able to touch. He sniffled and sobbed and his face crumpled and flushed. Horrifyingly enough,

he was even known to get the occasional hiccups. He was spared that ordeal this time, fortunately.

"Ah! Leonardo!"

Mike sucked in his sobs and straightened, eyes widening at his sensei. Splinter was looking past him, face brightened. Mike didn't dare turn around, dreading the expression he would find on Leo's face.

"Michelangelo needs to speak with you. It seems you two have much to discuss."

"Has he eaten?" Leo's voice was totally blank, and Mike could get no clues from it what Leo thought of the situation. Irritation, concern, and disdain, if present, were camouflaged with a discipline Mike could only admire.

Before Mike could answer, Splinter shook his head. "He has not. I trust you will correct that." The old rat pushed to his feet and hobbled toward his oldest son. Mike glanced over his shoulder. Leo and Splinter were bowing slightly to each other, and Splinter made his way to the couch. The older turtle breezed to the refrigerator and opened it without sparing a single glance for his sibling.

Now or never. Mike's heart pounded in his head, and tears stung his eyes again. He raised a hand to his face. "I'm sorry." It was barely more than a whisper.

Leo kept his face in the fridge. "Mac and cheese?" he queried, after the intolerable silence in the kitchen which had stretched on and on beyond what Mike could bear. He poured them both a glass of water.

Is the white flag not high enough? Mike screamed at him silently. *Do you want me to be more pathetic? FINE!* The hand dropped from his face, allowing two tears to fall from their constriction. "It's my fault. I'm sorry. I fucked up. I shouldn't've blamed you, I was wrong, I'm sorry..." The stream of words devolved into repetitive babble as his

mouth spurted whatever it might have possibly taken to win Leo's forgiveness.

"Mac and cheese it is," Leo continued, his voice monotone. "I'm sneaking vegetables into it so you actually get a few vitamins today. Until the day comes when they start fortifying Twinkies, you're out of luck."

"What do you want me to say?" Mike squeegeed tears from his face with the heel of his hand, as small as he could be. "Are there...are there magic words? I *fucked up* , Leo. Raph's not coming back, and it's my fault." *That's what you wanted me to say, right? Just admit it's my fault and things get better?* "What else do you want?"

The slight huff of air escaping Leo's nasal passages was almost audible this time, but still his eyes weren't bitter, just reserved. He set water to boil into two pans, so he could melt the cheese in a double pan.

He said, "Drink your water," by way of communicating what else he wanted right then and there, and left everything else out of his voice.

Mike stared at the water for a few seconds before picking it up and taking a sip. The knot in his throat made swallowing difficult, but a little moisture loosened it. A few more slow sips eased his stomach and cooled his insides, and he became aware of how flushed his face felt.

He wasn't avoiding the issue. He was looking out for me.

The knots were back in his throat, and he set the glass down before he could choke on it. *He's putting vegetables in the mac and cheese!* Relief washed over him like perfume, and he shed a few more tears as his muscles unwound. All at once, this struck him as an entirely hysterical thought. *I know my brother still loves me because he's putting veggies in the mac and cheese!* A sudden snort escaped him .

Leo set the cold broccoli and carrots atop the chopping boards and began hacking them into even, obsessively equal smaller chunks--no one could ever tell him he was not a creature who lived in the details. His face remained even, unaffected, but also unaccusing, not looking at Michelangelo's tears. "So. What've you been playing?" Leo dropped salt into the water as he added the pasta; he then added more to the cheese mixture which would be melted at the last moment. Leo was a decent cook when he wanted to be, at least.

Mike watched him work. A few sips of water later, he muttered, voice echoing inside the glass, "World of Warcraft." The glass was hastily set down. "Um. That's...yeah, tactics and strategy, and there's like, two sides." His voice picked up animation. Leo was asking him about World of Warcraft! "You got one side with the elves and dwarves and stuff, then you've got the side with the zombies and orcs and stuff. You'd like the orcs. They're all about honor. And they're these massive motherfuckers with..." It occurred to him that Leo was only being polite. Crestfallen, he cleared his throat and muttered, "Um...'ts not that interesting." *Read: you're not that interested, Leonardo you faker.*

The smell of food started to awaken his appetite. *Macaroni and cheese sounds pretty good.* Leo as dropped the pile of cut vegetables into the boiling water. On the double boiler, he began a mixture of cream and milk, salt and pepper, and slowly, while stirring, added cheddar and whatever generic American white cheese he'd found in the drawer. It smelled edible anyways. More salt. The cheese slowly turned from lumps to a thick sauce, coming up onto the spoon as he lifted it in delicious rivulets.

The pasta and veggies were al dente, the carrots decidedly unmushy, and the water in which the vegetable noodles and broccoli had been cooking was now green. Leo strained out the noodles and veggies by pulling the sieve right out of the pot, leaving the water behind; while they dribbled a bit over the sink, he emptied the pot into a pitcher, covered it, and deposited it in the fridge. Leo had always liked keeping water used to boil vegetables. Something about

the vitamins being boiled out and ending up in the water. Pasta back in the pot, now water-free, he poured the cheese over, and mixed.

Michelangelo watched as strands of dairy goodness were drawn through the air by the spoon, propping his cheek on his fist and bracing his elbow against the table. "I mean, you're not really interested in that kinda thing. And, uh, I don't usually play it twenty-four/seven. I just..." *needed to get away, needed to not look you in the eye, needed to delude myself into thinking you were wrong and that Raph was coming back* "...didn't...wanna handle things."

Wasn't that always what it came down to?

Leo spooned the pasta into a bowl and added a fork before bringing it to the table and setting it before his brother. He pulled a chair out and sat at the side adjoining Mike. "What scares me, Mike, is that you refuse to take care of yourself. Why do you do that?"

Mike stirred the pasta with his fork. "I thought if I punished myself enough, you'd..." He stopped and looked away. It sounded ridiculous.

"Eat," Leo ordered. Only after Mike shoveled a few forkfuls of cheesy macaroni into his mouth did he continue. "You thought if you stopped taking responsibility for your own well-being, gave me the silent treatment, and stubbornly avoided your family in their time of need, I'd forgive you?"

The food wasn't sitting well. *Just twist the knife, Leo. And bring on the salt.* "Well, I didn't really think about it that way."

"Of course you didn't," Leo said patiently, "but I did. It was incredibly selfish of you. I still forgive you, but not because of...that. I did you a wrong turn, too. I started throwing around the word 'fault,' and I shouldn't have. Fault has nothing to do with it now. This is just...what we have. We have to live, and heal, and move on with our lives."

"What about Raph?" The words fell out of his mouth of their own volition. Thinking about moving on when Raph wasn't even there seemed irreverent, almost.

Leo glanced at him sharply. "That's up to Raph. Not you, not me, not anyone else. Even if we never see him again. We have to go on. He needed us to heal along with him, and we weren't doing that. We were so caught up in helping him that we weren't even thinking about how we were victimized ourselves."

"When you say 'we,' you mean 'me,' right?" Mike said flatly. It wasn't really a question. "I mean, I know you've been preaching this at me since the beginning."

Leo blew out his breath. "I suppose Don and I had the opposite problem. In order to help ourselves, we had to try to help you guys. That was where we screwed up. Neither of us knew what we really had to do at first. Raph...said I was fighting his battles for him. That was true. Ever since he left, I've been trying to fight yours instead. It was just as wrong for me to do to you as it was for me to do to him. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I'm sorry too, by the way. Didn't mean what I said back then."

"I know. I told you to get mad. It doesn't matter anymore, anyway."

"Yeah. It's all good."

"Between us?"

"Yeah, and..." Mike's fingers tightened around his fork. "And we gotta be okay when Raph comes back. So he can see..."

Leo nodded softly, the ghost of a smile shining on his face. "When he comes back?"

I'm always the last one to lose hope. If I can't hope, what will everyone else do? "Yeah, freak face. I think he's coming back. Don't you?"

That little ghost came to life. "If you think so, I think there's a chance."

"Whaddya think?"

"It's…really little."

Casey puffed the air out of his lungs in exasperation. "She's got little hands, Raph. Just talk about the ring."

Raph tilted the tiny black velvet box against the sunlight. "Don't get me wrong, Case—it's pretty, it's just…kinda small."

"This is the biggest one they had that I could afford," Casey said defensively. "In case you forgot, I haven't worked for a month, an' my boss probably won't—" He stopped, suddenly sheepish.

Raph glanced sharply at him. "I ain't keepin' you here, Case."

"Yeah ya are," Casey protested without malice, then stumbled over himself when Raph's eyes narrowed. "N-no, I didn't mean it like that, I meant, I'd rather be here. It ain't like, a choice. It ain't 'cause you been askin' me ta stay, just 'cause…uh…"

"I get it," Raph growled begrudgingly, cupping the tiny box in his bulky hand and squinting at it, trying to imagine the ring on April's hand.

Casey shoved his hands into his pockets like an awkward teenager, peering over to peek at the ring. "Think she'll like it?"

"I have no idea," Raph grunted. "I ain't her boyfriend. Seems like she wears a lotta stuff like this. Y"know, the little silver things with the

little…" He tilted the ring further, so that it bounced back a sheen of golden light on its princess-cut surface. "Stuff that doesn't stand out too much, I guess." It was sort of like the truth. He'd seen her wear simpler jewelry, but also remembered some of the more interesting chandelier earrings she'd sported. Now didn't seem to be the right time to point this out.

Casey snatched the box from Raph's hand. "That's it, I'm takin' it back."

Raph shrugged. "'Sup to you. But speakin' as her brother, you better blind her with the next one."

That brought a smirk to Casey's lips. "As her brother, eh? Freak. You wanna help me pick it out? I got one a' their pamphlets."

Another shrug. "Just the fact that you been ring-shoppin' the one time gives you more experience than me, Case."

"Yeah, but I want it to be perfect."

"Damn straight." Raphael reached out and clasped the brochure Casey offered. He leafed through a few pages as Casey sank down beside him. "What about somethin' like that?" He pointed to one selection. "Seems like she likes those little pointy ovals. She's got a pair of earrings like that." He knew because she'd had them tear the lair apart when one went missing.

Casey squinted at it. "It ain't much bigger than the one I got."

"They got bigger ones. Like uh, that." Raph showed him a picture of a golden ring with a sizeable marquise-cut diamond. "Uh…dunno if they got one in silver or not."

Casey pointed to the pricing, which included silver, gold, white gold, and platinum versions of the ring. "Yeah, they do." He cringed inwardly at the price. "Guess we can just have two kids instead a' three," he muttered.

Raph snorted. "You'll be fine, jackass. It's April. You're proposin' ta April."

"Yeah." A dopey grin spread across Casey's face like margarine. "Maybe uh, white gold instead a' silver."

"Now you're talkin'. Got a credit card?"

"Yeah, but it's hers. Can't buy her ring usin' her money."

"Can you afford this?"

"Not really."

"Why can'tcha just pay off the credit card yourself?"

"It's kinda my only option." Casey gazed at the ring, and for the sake of not seeming awkward, so did Raph. The more he looked at it, the more perfect it seemed. Simple and elegant, big enough for a little dazzle and small enough to be tasteful. "Let's look at the ones they stick on for the wedding." Casey grabbed the brochure from Raph's hands. The ninja stared at the empty space between his hands for half a second, then spread both hands in benign wonder and dropped them to his thighs, peering at the brochure.

"I like that one," said Casey, pointing to a band set with two small emeralds meant to flank the larger diamond of the engagement ring. "Same color as her eyes."

Yes, April's eyes were freakishly green. "Nice," Raph agreed, "but shouldn't April be there for that part?"

"Yeah, I'm just…" Raph could fill in a hundred words Casey wanted to use to finish that sentence. *Excited. Impatient. Thinking. Dreaming. Daydreaming. Being a boyfriend. Hideously in love.* "Can't wait," Casey finished at last, ignoring the incongruity with his previous word choice. "She's the best thing that ever happened to me. She deserves all the perfect I can give her. God knows I don't

deserve her." He flipped back to his current choice of engagement ring, brown eyes fixing on it, flickering slightly as he examined each detail. "It's April's ring," he concluded. "Just…in white gold. Not silver. She doesn't deserve cheap."

Raph gave a tight, satisfied smile. "That's the way ta think. Want me ta drive?"

"You got a disguise?"

"I got your grandpa's old clothes. The man was fucking huge, Case. And did he ever wear anything but flannel shirts?"

"Ma made me a blanket outta some of his shirts she sewed together after he died, back when I was a kid. They were like, his trademark. You found that floppy old fishing hat of his, I see." Casey grinned at him over the brochure.

Raph swiped the hat off his scalp, slightly embarrassed. "Keeps my head cool," he muttered, crumpling the hat between his hands. "It ain't a fashion statement."

"Sure it is. It's just a bad one." Casey re-folded the pamphlet and stuffed the now-rejected princess-cut ring into his pocket. "You can drive if your feet reach the pedals, shorty."

A spike of elation shot through Raph's head, and he threw a punch at Casey's arm, a wild grin tearing his face open. Casey apparently caught off-guard, hissed in pain and drew back, suddenly growing as demure as—

"Just because I don't hafta duck when helicopters fly over me don't mean I'm short, fruitcake." *Don't start looking like that again, Case. You were so fucking close, we were so fucking close to being just like we were…*

The subtle guilt that had begun to line Casey's face faded and gave way to a relieved grin. "Fruitcake, Raphie-boy? You were the one

sittin' there pickin' out an engagement ring for me, if you wanna talk about fruitcake. But hey, if that's the way you swing, I'm cool with that. Some like it—" He stopped suddenly.

It took Raph half a second to discern the reason for the sudden stop, but a burning twist in his gut accompanied by a brief, quick-suppressed flash of memory gave him the idea. *Dammit, Case, you can't keep thinking like that.* But now that the thought was in his head, he couldn't keep the tasteless joke going. Even blinking the images from his internal eyes could not keep him from feeling like he was turning into a marble statue. Somber again. *You can't define anything by what happened to me. You can't walk on eggshells around me, or I'll go crazy. It's how I went crazy last time.*

To make things worse, Casey sighed deeply and ran a hand over his now-unsmiling face. "Shit, Raph, I'm sor—"

That word sparked and ignited a long-suppressed inferno in Raph's blood. Not insane rage, not desperate hysteria, but pure, uncompromised anger. "DON'T YOU FUCKING SAY IT."

The bellow halted Casey in his tracks. "What?"

"Quit sayin' that. I mean, yeah, it was a stupid joke, an' it's a good thing I was the only one around ta hear it."

"You started—" Casey stopped again.

"Yeah, I said fruitcake, but that's not…" Raph wanted to throttle Casey. Just a quick squeeze, a swift twist…but no. "Case, I wasn't even thinkin' about that till you stopped talkin' like you did. I wanna keep jokin' around with ya, and it ain't the same if you're too scared a' me to insult me."

"It uh, didn't seem like the right kinda joke," Casey mumbled.

"So think about what you're sayin' before you say it, an' keep sayin' it if you're already sayin' it." Raph stared intently at Casey, and words

rolled from his mouth as easily as they had through his head when this had all begun. "I ain't a rape victim, Case."

The look on Casey's face begged to differ. "It's just…it's still…" Casey was terrible at keeping his thoughts off his face, which scrunched in conflict. "I just…owe ya bigtime, Raph. I don't wanna owe you more."

"You don't owe me nothin', Case. I forgive you." The words came out sounding slightly exasperated, and it only then occurred to Raph that he had never said this before, or quite meant it. It hung in his mind and echoed back and forth within its walls, and with each echo the tightness in his chest, so constant the past two months that he'd forgotten it was there, eased. *I forgive you. No debts. No eggshells. Clean slate. We start over.*

Casey's eyes widened to the size of dinner plates, and silence hung between them for a full minute. Raph knew he wouldn't believe him. Forgiveness wasn't a word that often entered Casey's vocabulary. Well, it had just become the most important word he knew. "You… you serious?" Casey asked at last, squinting in disbelief.

"Never been more serious, Case," Raph said softly, forcing himself to look his friend in the eye. Casey's eyes were electric, unbelieving and almost blank. "I mean, I ain't sayin' you don't got a ways to go till I trust you like I did," he amended quickly. "An' I can guarantee it'll take longer for you ta get Leo's trust back. But you don't owe me anything anymore. I just…can't take ya actin' like you'll break me. It took a hell of a lot more than bad jokes ta break me, Case. Trust me, you couldn't do it now if ya tried." Raph's eyes swerved to the view from the porch, squinting, frowning a little at the still-too-fresh memory of being utterly lost.

"You didn't break," Casey begun.

We are broken, Raphael, when we allow ourselves to become subservient to our experiences. "Yeah I did," Raph said softly. "I broke. It just wasn't all at once." *It was over time, piece by piece,*

chipped and chiseled until there was nothing left. "But I ain't anymore, thanks ta you. If ya think about it, you didn't do worse than…" *Than my family* . He bowed his head.

They had all broken.

He felt Casey's hand clasp his shoulder and shake him gently. "You gotta understand, Raph. I just…I don't deserve it. I fucked up so bad, it's hard to accept somethin' like this, y'know?"

Because I can take it away as easily as I give it? Sounds like I'm not the only one with trust issues. "Yeah, ya fucked up bad. Thing is, if you deserved it, I wouldn't have ta forgive ya. But I wanna. An' I ain't takin' it back. Next time I'm bad atcha, it won't be for this." *At least, if I'm mad at you for this, I won't take it out on you.* "It's my choice, Case." He finally met the man's eyes again. "You okay with that?"

It took an eternity for Casey to stiffly nod his head, and Raph still wasn't sure if he was doing so just to make him happy. He would get the idea. It took time to stop being broken.

Broken night *grace* feel taper **logos** march *Verification* UNDERSTOOD validated **die** conference fight Falling curses glass *unison* hollow **confession** Order impossible ***brother*** hazard *duty* Presence **I** can SEE Him *Dying*

There was an idle knock at the door, and Donatello glanced up at it. He was covered from fingertips to elbows in dripping flour-glue, his globe at least a quarter of an inch thicker than it had been a week ago. If left on its own, it would probably never dry before it grew mildew and had to be thrown out, so Don had started drying it each night with a discarded hair dryer he'd rescued from April's apartment some time ago. The project appeared complete, but did not feel so. There was something in the words that had yet to be reached, and he hating to be interrupted when he felt like he was on a roll.

"Come in," he sighed.

The door opened, and to Don's surprise, Michelangelo peered in, looking good-naturedly apprehensive. "Hey."

"Hey," Don replied, trying to remember the last time he'd seen Mike out of his room. Not that Don had been much better, aside from coming out for every meal and practice they had. A slight wistfulness crossed his chest at the sight of his brother. *I wish Mike were here to help me.* Well, now he was here.

Mike nudged the door further open and stepped inside. His eyes fell on the globe. "Cool!" he said in half-genuine enthusiasm. "Can I help?"

Leo must have sent him in. God bless Leo. Who knew what their oldest brother had said to get Mike out of his room and apparently active again. Don grinned, pretending he thought the idea had been fully Mike's. "Sure!" He scooted a stack of words toward Mike with the cleaner of his two elbows. Mike happily trotted forth and started sorting through them. Don turned back to his own stack and found, appropriately, the word "help." He smeared paste from his fingers onto the back of the word and pressed it onto the Indian Ocean.

A glance at Mike revealed that he was less than satisfied with his choice of words. The younger turtle deposited his stack into a nearby trash can and grabbed an already-gutted newspaper and a pair of scissors. Don watched as he clipped out a large word from a headline, dunked it in a bowl of paste, and plastered it onto the Atlantic Ocean.

TRUST.

"You don't have the right words," Mike grumbled, clipping out another word and setting it on the table.

Don picked it up. It said "hope." "You got faith and love in there somewhere?" he muttered.

"It's only cliché because it's real, man." Mike set down another bit of paper that read "forgive." "If it didn't work, no one would talk about it enough for it to become cliché. Time-tested truth." The next word was "LIVE."

"I didn't invite you in here to make my project into an inspirational after-school special," said Don, but he picked up the word "LIVE" and pasted it by Eurasia. That was something he wanted to do. Living. He liked that a lot more than "broken." Frowning, he picked up a half-shredded magazine and, for lack of scissors, started tearing out words with his fingers as delicately as possible. Mike was right after all. He didn't have the right words.

Rebirth **found** *redeemed* beloved **FAMILY** heal Together *overcome* REAL *energy* **Life** miraculous climb *valued* **VICTORY depth** *underlying* untainted **love** …

"Got it," Casey said with a massive grin, sliding into the car. He handed a tiny box, this one a deep red velvet, to the terrapin driver.

Raph took it and opened it, feeling a noiseless creak with his fingertips as the hunge worked. His eyes widened. He knew the pictures in the pamphlet had been enlarged, but apparently they hadn't been as enlarged as he'd thought. The stone was considerably more sizeable than the last, elegantly cut, and sparkled nicely, as far as he could tell. The white gold did make a difference, somehow, whiter and more expensive-looking than the silver. He gave a low whistle. "Now THAT'S better. That, I can see her wearin' all the time an' showin' off to her friends." He glanced up at Casey, whose eyes were sparkling maniacally.

"You think so?" Casey took the ring back and gazed at it with a dopey grin. "You can see her goin' around tellin' everyone 'Casey Jones asked me ta marry him?'"

"Yeah," Raph said with a small smile, "an' they'll all sympathize."

He'd said the wrong thing, he realized, as soon as Casey's face fell. "Oh shit," muttered the man. "Ohshitohshitohshitohshit…"

"Whoa, Case," Raph backed up, attempting damage control, "she'll say yes. I swear, okay?"

"…shitohshitohshitohshitohshitohshitohshit shit SHIT!" Casey slammed back against the back of his seat, a desperate swipe of his hand flinging stray hairs from his face. "What if she DOESN'T?"

"She will!"

"No she won't!"

"Then why are you askin' her, huh?"

"Cause she…might say yes." The last three words were said more quietly as the realization that he had hope no matter what he said spread across his bewildered face. Casey was so easy to read.

"She'll say yes," Raph repeated, smirking a little. Stupid Casey. Or not stupid Casey. He was smarter than he thought he was, and in expecting himself to be dumb, acted dumb. "Trust me. Handsome specimen like you? She's all yours."

"You SURE you don't want me yourself, Raph?" Casey grinned hugely at him and leaned toward him, puckering his lips and making kissing sounds.

Raph covered Casey's face with his hand and shoved him back toward his own seat, rolling his eyes. That was too much like Mikey not to be irritating. "In your dreams, punkface."

Silence fell then, and Raph glanced sharply at Casey. But the vigilante was only drooling over the new ring again, brushing back from his face the stray black strands that wouldn't quite work into his sloppy ponytail. At least he wasn't quiet with guilt. "You ever gonna stop starin' at that thing?"

"Main reason you're drivin', man."

Raph cleared his throat, heart fluttering slightly. If he was going to make a move in this direction, he had to make it now. "Actually, I was wonderin' if you wouldn't mind drivin."

"How come?"

"I'm…thinkin' about callin' someone."

Casey's eyes snapped from the ring and squinted at Raph. A smile toyed with the corners of his mouth, but his lips tightened with uncertainty and flattened the line of his mouth. "Thinkin' about it?"

"Yeah."

"I'll drive. Why're ya just thinkin' about it?"

' *Cause I'm fucking terrified of who'll answer—my brothers, or my babysitters.* "Shut your mouth."

"C'mon, Raph, you can tell me anything. What, you scared?"

Raphael was scared of a lot of things. This entire experience taught him that, if nothing else. But this? After everything he'd been through? *Damn him!* "I ain't scared," he said hastily.

"Then whatcha waitin' for?" Casey's eyes glinted knowingly. He was playing with him. Bad. Raph was going to kill him horribly. But Casey knew how to play. *Damn him.*

Casey opened the door and sauntered around the front of the truck. Raph slid into the passenger's seat. As Casey climbed into the driver's seat, he dug his cell phone out of his back pocket and tossed it to Raph. "All yours," he said.

Raph stared at the phone as Casey slammed the driver's side door shut, shaking the whole truck. The phone swerved before his eyes

as the force rippled through him. Or maybe the phone was staying in one place and he was the one swaying. *I ain't scared* .

He flipped the phone open and dialed Mike's number.

Chapter 15

"Hello?"

"Mikey?"

"Raph?"

"Yeah."

"RAPH?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"Shit—RAPH!"

"Sh, quiet, I don't want anyone to know I called, I just wanna talk ta you right now."

"I—Raph!"

A small smile tweaked Raph's lips, the enthusiasm in Mike's voice exactly the way he remembered his younger brother. "Yeah, Mikey, it's me."

"Dude, it's so good ta—a-are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm fine."

"Dude, I mean…wow, it's great to hear your voice. Whatchyou been doin'?"

"Not much. Just…hangin' around with Casey, mostly. Thinkin'."

"Raph, I gotta tell ya, I'm so sorry about—"

"Don't talk about it, Mikey," Raph muttered gruffly but gently. "Don't think about it--it's over. It's okay."

"…Okay. Uh, ya gotta know, Leo and Don aren't here, but they'll be back in like twenty minutes, and this phone is like, tethered to the wall and stuff. So they'd catch me."

"In twenty minutes I might be ready ta talk to them. Where's Master Splinter?"

"Shower. Oh DUDE! I finished the second issue!"

"Of what, Mikey?" Raph surprised himself by being fiercely interested in knowing what new comic book series Mike was into now.

"My comic book…oh, yeah, I never showed you that."

"How come?"

There was quite a bit of hesitation from the other end of the line. "Uh, well…it's kinda personal, and…uh…"

"It's about the Turtle Titan, ain't it?"

"No." There was a pause. "Do you think I should put the Turtle Titan in it?"

Raph grinned and shook his head. "I love you, Mike," he said out of the blue, surprising himself again.

There was a pause. "Love you too, bro."

All four of those words made Raph choke as though he had never heard them before. Normally, he didn't think much of the phrase, but to deliver the sentiment wholeheartedly and have it returned to him… it was as though Mike actually meant it. Actually meant it like Raph did. Static prickled Raph's face, he held his breath, head bowed, becoming less and less aware of his own body.

"Raph?"

Mike, whose hero had been…

"Raph? You still there?"

"Yeah," Raph said breathlessly, voice wavering.

"Are you…?" The question trailed off. Raph was glad it wasn't completed. He didn't want to lie about whether or not he was crying.

He wiped his eyes. "Just…gimme a minute. It's…it's good to hear your voice."

"Yeah, same to you, seriously."

There it was again. Mike couldn't possibly want to hear his voice. Not the voice of pathetic weakling Raphael, standing there with the phone pressed to his face and tears leaking from his eyes and snot running in his nostrils and still reeling from being completely broken by a group of lowlifes. This whole situation suddenly struck him as impossible, and he grit his teeth. What was it with him and crying now?

"How can it, Mike? I mean, I-I got…How can you still—"

"Dude. It's not your fault. Things happen."

Raph swallowed. "Yeah, I know."

"So uh, when are you coming home?"

"I, uh, I dunno. But uh, you guys should come down here." The words were out before Raph knew what he was saying, but somehow, he didn't regret a single one of them.

"Really?" Mike sounded unabashedly ecstatic.

"Yeah, Casey's already havin' April up for her birthday. You could ride up with her. We're at the old farmhouse." The more he talked about it, the more Raph liked the idea. He could see Mike's excited face in person instead of just imagining it from what he could hear over the phone.

"I knew it!" Mike squeaked. "I told Leo you were too uncreative to go anywhere else!"

"Who's that?"

Panic drew Raph's throat shut like a drawstring. That was Leo's voice. He did not want to talk to Leo right now.

"Nobody!"

"Is that Raph?"

"No! Hey—It's mine, Leo, he called *me!* "

"Raph?"

Raph hung up the phone. He glanced at Casey, who raised his eyebrows without taking his eyes from the road. "Well?" asked Casey.

The ninja took a deep breath. "They're comin'."

The van crunched to a halt at the end of the long gravel driveway, and April was the first to fling her door open and jog to the man standing on the porch. "Hey!"

"Hey!" Casey beamed as he spread his arms out to her. "Happy birthday!"

April raveled her arms around his neck and plucked a kiss from his lips. "Thanks. Where's Raph?"

Casey cleared his throat nervously and glanced in the direction of Splinter, who was being helped out of the van by Leonardo and Donatello. "He's somewhere else. Said he wanted to talk to you guys one-on-one first."

Splinter settled onto his feet, nodded softly. "We meet on his terms. Where has he gone?"

"He's over by the tire swing near the river."

Raphael looked as nervous as Donatello felt when he approached his wayward brother, who sat on the bank of the river with his feet dangling over the edge. It felt a little surreal to see Raph sitting there, breathing, shifting, more animate than Don's many dreams of him, which had usually shown him dead of sepsis or suicide. Raph turned his head slightly, as if viewing Don out of his peripheral vision, the one visible eye glinting like the water as the shadows from the trees passed overhead. Don shivered. He sank down beside his brother, dropping his feet over the edge of the steep bank and letting them hang. Raph turned his face back to the trees ahead, not once glancing directly at Don.

Is that it, Raphael? Are you still giving me the silent treatment? By now, I'd think I'd have paid for any wrong, especially since you weren't any better.

Don cleared his throat. "If you're still bitter at me, how about we talk through it instead of pretending we're enemies?"

That made Raph glance sharply at him. "Whaddya mean?"

"I mean you were fighting me even before I started playing dirty, Raph," said Don. "But somehow, I'm the only one who has to apologize, which I have done. So what now?" Donatello watched his brother carefully.

The veins in Raph's neck flashed into visibility, then disappeared, brief agitation passing. "I know you were just tryin' a' help. Butcha fucked up. Didn't even think about what I needed you ta--"

"What you needed was the first thing on my mind," Don said patiently, "but you weren't giving me any clues. I'm not even convinced you knew what it was yourself. But if you wanted something from us, you needed to quit fighting us and let us know what it was. Meet us halfway."

That was caused Raph's eyes to widen briefly. "Halfway, huh?" Those eyes fell to the stream below them. For a moment, no one said a word besides the river and the birds and the squirrels crashing in the trees. The sun was warm and the wind was cool. "Okay," Raph said quietly. "Whaddya want?"

"Huh?"

"I'm gonna meetcha halfway. Whaddya want from me?"

Don blinked. That was...a strange question, suddenly. He wanted for Raph not to fight him, to be his ally and brother again. But what could he ask of Raph now? All he wanted at the moment was to know for certain that Raph was okay. His tongue flicked out to moisten his lips. "Have you been having any flashbacks lately?"

There was a pause, as if Raph was thinking. "Not for a couple weeks," he said with some certainty.

"Nightmares?"

A longer pause. "Sometimes."

Don's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "How sometimes?"

Raph's hand darted behind his neck to give the muscles there a nervous rub. "Just sometimes."

"Raph..."

"Almost every night."

Don nodded slowly, unsurprised. "I think you can expect that for a while. And don't be surprised by any flashbacks, either. But...please, please tell me if you feel suicidal again. I know how you feel about drugs, and if you don't want to go that route, we can probably find some sort of therapy for you over the phone."

Raph shook his head softly. "Don't think I'd do so good with therapy. Prob'ly end up yellin' at some shrink who keeps askin' me how I feel." His eyes finally swerved to his brother. "Did any a' your research say if there was anythin' else that could...help?"

This was the hard part. Don shook his head slowly. "If you're asking me for some kind of...of thought process, or trick, there isn't any that I've found. Even...even in my own experiences, sometimes all you can do is just...keep going. And eventually, you make it through."

"Sounds about right," Raph said quietly. He watched Don intently, eyes half-lidded, expression unreadable. "Anythin' else you want?"

Don gave a wilting shrug, eyes flicking out to view the river. "Just...my life. Back."

"Makes two of us."

Raph didn't seem to notice Mike was there. Of course, Mike knew better. Raph, probably as nervous as Mike himself, was just waiting for his brother to make the first move. This hardly seemed hair, as notoriously bad as Mike was at first moves. It was almost as unfair as Raph asking him to act like everything was okay had been. That thought wasn't any kind of an "in." He had to find an "in," a way to make the first move without totally destroying his chances of repairing things with Raph. Which was why he'd brought his comic book. But shoving a comic book in Raph's face in and of itself hardly seemed like an actual first move. It was more like an act of aggression or something. *Thwap! Read this!*

Mike found his "in" when his desperate eyes landed on the nearby tire swing. Casually tossing the comic book onto a dry patch of grass, he made a beeline for the swing. "Dude!" he said excitedly. "I totally forgot this was here!" He grabbed the rope and hopped onto the tire, perched rather precariously on top. The swing swiveled. "Y'know, Master Splinter should so use this thing to teach us balance. Wouldn't that be great? Like, a whole lesson of nothing but playing around on tire swings?" He climbed to stand up on the tire.

When he looked down with a grin, Raph was watching him with a shockingly run-of-the-will "You are the Great Idiot, before which all other idiots are humbled" look. Or at least a shockingly run-of-the-mill "You dumbass" look. "That rope's like, fifty years old, genius," he grunted, tilting his head, eyes shining with a vague interest in how this was going to turn out. "Now, I'm not one ta urge you not ta fall flat on your face, but if I don't point it out, you'll be buggin' me later for not warnin' ya."

Mike leaned back sharply in direct defiance of Raph's non-concern, making the swing kick forward like a mule. "Your brotherly protectiveness overwhelms me, Raphael," he said, yanking on the rope harshly as proof that it would not break. The tree limb it was tied to creaked. "As does your confidence in my ability to not become horizontal when I don't mean to."

"That tree's been dead since the Age of Enlightenment, which you missed out on," Raph continued, a slight smile touching his lips. "If that thing falls on ya, don't come cryin' ta me."

"Trust me. If this thing fell on me, I'd go to someone with a heart. And better breath." Mike shifted his hands higher on the rope and started to climb slowly.

Raph watched for a few seconds longer, then pushed himself to his feet. "Geddown from there, dumbass," he growled good-naturedly in his "I'm actually worried about you but sure as hell won't show it" voice. He reached up for Mike's elbow.

Michelangelo, still defiant, sprang from the swing in a backflip and landed lightly on his feet. "Helping, Raph?" He feigned shock. "I never thought I'd see the day!"

"Whatever," grunted Raph, slinking back to his previous seat by the river and plucking up the comic book. "What's this, anyway?" he asked before scanning down the front cover. His eyes widened. Mike grinned broadly and flopped down beside him, drinking in his brother's reaction. Raphael was staring at the cover, on which was a carefully-drawn figure crouched on a rooftop with the New York cityscape, arced over by the creamy circle of the moon, behind him. Blazing across the moon in red was the title.

The Nightwatcher .

"I can't look at this," Raph said immediately, shoving the book into Mike's lap and burying his face in his hands. Mike blinked, catching the fragile book gingerly to avoid creasing. Raph's shoulders hunched, and his knees drew up. He looked overwhelmed.

Mike swallowed his alarm. Had he made a terrible mistake? He'd thought Raph would be flattered, or amused, or scornful. His heart sank horribly. Raph didn't even want to look at his comic book! And he'd worked on it for ages, laboring over every painful detail, and he'd thought his brother would be so proud, and...and... He patted Raph's arm in placation, half-desperate. "No, it's...it's okay, I didn't mean--"

"I don't deserve you."

Say what? Mike's mouth hung open.

"I ain't a hero, Mikey. You...ya shouldn't think a' me like that. It'll getcha down every time I fail."

"What...NO! Fuck, Raph, you...you came OUT of it."

"I ain't out of it yet."

"But you got this far. I don't think I could do that."

"You could, Mikey. You're stronger'n I am, in some ways."

Had Raph really just said that? That was insane. "Dude, I'd be a mess. Like, I don't even know--"

"Could we...quit talkin' about it? I don't wanna think about it happenin'..."

Mike's eyes widened as his mind and Raph's faraway expression supplied the rest of that sentence. *I don't wanna think about it happening ta you.* "I'd...it wouldn't be *worse* --"

"Mikey, the only good thing about all this is that it didn't happen ta you. I couldn't a'...I couldn't a' handled it. Not bein' able ta stop it."

Mike couldn't say he didn't need Raph to keep it from happening. First of all, it probably wasn't true. Second, it would only make things worse. "I mean, I don't hang out with Casey that much. But uh, if it'd been you and me? You wouldn't've let it happen. So it's moot. No 'what if.' It just wouldn't've happened to me."

"You say that. But those guys took me down pretty quick."

"If I remember right, they blundered the whole operation and had to go back later for another try. If they took you down, it was by accident. You've...you've got me outta real tight spots before. Got all of us out of 'em, even. That shows you can do it. It's not...hm. This? Doesn't matter. I mean, it matters, but it's not like, demonstrative of how strong you are, or how like, Batman you are, 'cause you're pretty darn Batman, if you ask me." He plucked the comic book from his lap and stared at the cover. "There should be a Nightwatcher comic series. Like, a real one."

"Then make one," Raph said flatly. "Do whatcha want. Just keep bein' yourself. Like I said, the only good thing is that it didn't happen ta you, an' you shouldn't act like it did. If it had ta happen ta one of

us, I'm glad it was me. If you're all...damn." Raph hissed in frustration.

He was having trouble putting words to his thoughts again, Mike could tell. He clapped him lightly on the shoulder. "If we're acting like we did before, it's not much different for you than if it did happen to one of us?"

"It ain't like that exactly. I mean, it is different, 'cause I know it didn't happen ta you, but...I guess. Pretty much."

Mike swallowed uncomfortably. "And on some level, you want us to be kinda glad it happened to you and not one of us, 'cause it means you uh, took one for the team? Like if it had to happen?"

Raph wet his lips, and nodded.

"Dude. Problem with that. It didn't have to happen."

"I know. So it's...meaningless?"

"I don't think it's a matter of meaning something, like, right now. I dunno. I've been having a random insight fluke, but you'll hafta talk to Master Splinter about this one. He'll figure out a way it means something in the long run. But uh, I'm not good at that stuff. I play video games. But if it helps, you mean a hell of a lot to me."

Raph suddenly caught Mike around the neck with his arm and pulled him in, forcing a startled yelp from Michelangelo. "Yeah, I know," he grumbled, giving his sibling a painful noogie.

"So you and Casey are friendly again." It came out sounding bitterer than Leo intended, or even felt. Casey had taken care of Raph. It didn't mean he was Leo's favorite person, but it made their relationship a little easier, even if taking care of Raph was Leo's job. It was Leo's job, but Casey was doing it, while Raph wouldn't even talk to him on the phone.

The most startling thing about Raph's reaction to the comment was that he didn't seem to have one. His face was as smooth as glass. Maybe he understood why Leo might resent this. Yes, it was a look Raph had had before, when he was in an ultimate state of peace about a decision he'd made. It almost never happened. "I forgave Casey, Leo. Ain't no reason you shouldn't."

Leo relaxed. "I guess it's just a sign of things going back to normal."

Raph's face twitched in thought. "Not normal. Just...life. Things ain't never gonna be the way they were."

"If things were every the way they were. The older I get, the more it seems like things just keep changing."

"That's true."

Leo sank down onto the grass beside his brother. "I think...I think the reason I kept trying to fight your battles for you was because they were my battles, too. I meant what I said when I said it happened to me, too. I...wanted to heal you, because I was healing myself at the same time. It...probably would have been easier, somehow, if it had happened to me."

"Only it didn't." Raph's voice was tinted with tension, as though warning Leo not to go there again.

Leo almost couldn't believe it when he found himself saying, "It...happens every night, in my dreams." *No, don't tell him this! It will only make things awkward!* "It's worse every time. It's like my brain is trying to decide what it was like for you. Isn't..." He laughed bitterly, eyes sliding shut as his face lit with flame. "Isn't that the most screwed-up thing you ever heard?" He'd said too much. Now Raph would feel as guilty as if he'd sent the dreams himself like clinging strands of silk spiderwebs, floating down currents of thought to haunt Leonardo at night.

He was right. When he glanced quickly at Raph, his brother's eyes were wide. "Fuck, Leo, I didn't...fuck! I'm sorry, I..." He moved his lips around silent words for a moment, then moistened them with the tip of his tongue. "You…want me ta tell you what happened?"

Leo's heart leapt into his throat an created a painful lump there. Raph had seized upon an uncomfortable thought. As little as Leo wanted to know of his brother's darkest pain, knowing might take away the creative power of his nightmares. Not House's twisted, half-fabricated version, but the truth through Raphael's eyes, the most honest, brutal perspective of all. Raph's offer to open himself moved him, and he nearly seized his brother in an embrace. "I think…for my sanity, I'd like to know, but I can't ask you to tell me," he said cautiously.

Raph waved Leo's caution off with a toss of his hand, which shook more than he probably realized. "It's okay," he said nonchalantly. "Ah, it…probably wasn't as bad as you think. That's weird ta say. But. Uh. It coulda been a lot worse. I think a big part of it was bein' shit scared every second it was gonna *get* a lot worse. But mostly, they just held me still an' did it. An' they laughed, an called me names. I don't remember too much about what they said. It's like… my brain was somewhere else. I knew what was happenin', but I couldn't concentrate on it even if I wanted to."

That was good, right? Only... "Where was your brain?"

"I dunno. I couldn't really think at all. It's like when you're in a fight you know you're about ta lose an' your body's doin' all the work for ya. Like some really, really sharp nightmare. You feel everythin', you know what's goin' on, but you can't put names to anything' or-or find words or…it was weird. The only thing I could really *think* was, 'I hafta get outta this.' An' I could… *think* ain't the right word…I could *remember* why. Things like, how I promised Mike I'd show 'im my Boondocks DVDs."

"That's weird," Leo admitted.

A corner of Raph's mouth turned up at this honesty. "Yeah. Then things started gettin' worse, an' it was hard for my brain ta just…fuzz up like that." His face faded into dark blankness, and his voice acquired a forced edge. "It hurt like hell. I can't even tell ya. Jez said…said I must like it. Called me a dirty little whore. I couldn't…it's like the last little part of my pride was just…an' I spit, but that was so fuckin' stupid a' me. Next thing I know he's shoved the flashlight in my mouth an' tellin' me ta swallow. I couldn't. Could barely even hold down what I'd swallowed three hours earlier. Later, I hated myself for not tryin' a' escape then. Before, I knew if I put up too much of a fight, it'd kill me. Now it's someplace less lethal, an' I can…but I didn't even *think* about it, dammit. I had two big guys holdin' me down an' a fuckin' bullet in my leg an' no blood left anywhere, an' I thought I was gonna die. That an' a flashlight in my throat that used to be in…" The volume dropped, and he murmured, "Is that all it takes ta bring me down?"

Leo stared at his brother. He had never heard him talk like this before. Raph had never been one for explaining himself. Now, he seemed almost in a trance, and the words formed themselves, dropping from his mouth like pebbles and clattering into the hollowly tinkling stream with dull echoes. He wet his lips. "I think any of us would have done the same. That scares me. Before this, we were all pretty sure nothing like this could happen to us."

Raph nodded a little. "The whole time, I was wonderin' when Casey was gonna show up."

"And he never did."

Raph shrugged. "He showed up, yeah, but it was after it stopped. Saved my life. I was back in the game long enough ta see that. Saw Jez about ta shoot 'im. Saw a gun lyin' on the ground. Didn't even think. Just picked it up an' shot 'im. If I'd accidentally shot Casey instead, I'd a' kept shootin' till I hit the right one. I didn't need anyone to avenge me. I killed the bastard myself."

"House was talking like he was just an accomplice," Leo said with a nod, trying not to think about the message Raph was giving to him in his last statements. It was a message already well-delivered, a lesson well-learned. Done to death, even. But it hadn't been to avenge Raph alone that he'd killed House.

"He was laughin' with the rest of 'em. Three guys, Leo. Crackin' up like this is the best shit they ever saw on TV, one pretendin' it ain't happenin', one standin' around hopin' it kills me. They laughed when I screamed, an' every time I jerked away or tried ta fight or choked on the flashlight. Everythin' I did was funny to 'em. I was in hell, an' they thought it was a Simpsons episode. An' nothin' I did…I couldn't…" His voice caught in his throat, and he coughed a little.

"Hey. Shh."

"I don't wanna talk about this anymore."

"You don't have to."

When his sons had been small, Splinter had taken bitter joy in patching their wounds—a scrape to the knee caused him as much pain as it caused them, but he treasured the feeling of intimacy that his sons' dependence brought him. The joy in caring for his sons, however, was quite different from the joy that had overwhelmed and battered him when his boys turned eight. One day, when his sons returned from playing in the sewers, one of them had an abrasion across his cheek. Splinter had known nothing of it until Raphael had emerged from the bathroom with his wound already cleaned and crudely bandaged. Shortly afterward, Leonardo had stopped going to his father for physical healing, not one to let Raphael surpass him. As much as Splinter had hoped his other two sons would gain the same independence, Donatello continued to trust his sensei's wisdom and learn from it, and Michelangelo still cherished the attention received from such times.

Sometimes Splinter believed he could still see the faint scar from the abrasion on his son's face, and was never certain if it was the ghost of the newness of Raphael's independence that day. Sometimes it was like a lingering kiss upon his cheek, a wealth of self-reliance and pride, and sometimes it was a curse, a deep affliction carved into his skin with the self-inflicted isolation that shadowed his every step in the world. Seeing such independence caused Splinter great joy and great pain; he could no longer take away Raphael's pain, and yet he knew that Raphael could stand up under it, bandage his wounds, and even cast it all aside when he no longer had use for it. Even now, as Splinter watched him in silence, his scars were fading, becoming more the kiss and less the curse.

Perhaps this time, all his brothers would follow in his footsteps.

His boy. His little boy, his beloved child, the face he recognized and the eyes he did not. He wanted to wrap his arms around him until he drew out his own, his dear child, and knew he had not lost his strong son, his miraculous Raphael. But there was a mirror over Raphael's eyes, and Splinter did not know who he was looking at.

"Who are you?"

Raphael's eyes widened slightly, then were cast downward. A moment of deep silence and self-penetrating thought passed, until his son spoke in that deep, familiar voice, hoarse with uncertainty. "Same person I always was, I guess. Just...been through more."

"And who am I?"

"Same person you always..." The mirror in front of Raphael's eyes cracked and bled his soul, filling his eyes. Splinter watched in wonder as his strong son bowed his head, shoulders shaking.

Pride and joy crashed over Splinter like a wave, filling his eyes until the image of his son blurred. Only then did he seize Raphael in his arms and cling to him, holding his sobbing child to his chest until his arms ached. Those blessed tears dampened his silk robe, those

god-sent tears that showed how deeply Raphael knew the truth of what he said. His son, his beautiful child.

"My Raphael. Welcome home."

Raphael opened his eyes and saw an open grave.

The day had been such a blur, such a gauntlet of emotions and confrontations that he wasn't quite sure how he got here. It was night, and Casey and April were nowhere to be seen. He must be proposing to her at this very moment. Mike had adopted the persona of an ancient aboriginal stereotype and was dancing around the bonfire, yodeling at the top of his lungs. Splinter and Leo conversed as quietly as they could and still hear each other over Mike's antics. Don sat nearby, smiling and adding mustard to his hot dog. Raph's lay untouched on his plate nearby.

It was like the pages of his future had been ripped out and scattered in the wind, and he could only chase the whirling sheets and attempt to set order to the little he took hold of. Some things were still recognizable and intact. Some were gone for good. Some he had once deemed vital didn't seem so important now.

I'm alive. I've come out. I beat it.

Because breaking is a part of life, and all one can do for it is tape pages back into a tattered book. Because on the other end of pain is life, for the rest of your life. Because hardships are hard, and there is no trick that will make them easier.

Time and again he had buried his darkness, only to turn and see it shadowing him still. Now it lay at his feet, docile for the most part, still there but wholly conquerable. He could bury it again, and have it emerge clinging to his skin as strong as before, but now it had become a part of him, an experience he could no longer deny its place. Instead, he left the grave his doubts, his denial, his despair. Perhaps those would stay buried. Most likely not.

I don't know.

Into the grave.

I won't break.

Into the grave.

I am so fucked up.

Buried.

Michelangelo laughed, soft earth fell, and Raphael covered his dead. Everything had changed, just like everything does. He watched his future scatter and felt not loss, but release. Anything could happen now.

As long as his family was a part of it.

If the difference between heaven and hell is the company, I'm doing pretty good.

He felt dirt underneath his fingernails, pain from labor and redemption, and he smiled.

"Marshmallow, Don-san?"

"That's disgusting, Mikey. Maybe if you have one without the carcinogens."

"The slow, boring ones that don't flare up into Cajun-blackened perfection like miniature Balrogs, you mean?"

"I can't think of much that sounds more dangerous to consume than a Balrog, Mikey, but DON'T take that as an opportunity to inform me."

"Damn."

"Michelangelo! Put that out!"

"I got it, Sensei. Quit throwing hay in the fire, Pyro."

"You are the quencher of fun, Leo. You are the Anti-Fun."

"I'll live."

"Wanna try a s'more the way it's supposed to be, Mike?"

"Whatever, dude, s'long as it's a s'more. I want s'more s'mores."

"Should've given him celery, Don. He's already had way too much sugar."

"Is Raph okay?"

"GUYS!"

"Hey, you're back early!"

"We've got—"

"WE'RE ENGAGED!"

"What?"

"What?"

"Awesome!"

"Congratulations!"

"Casey, you knucklehead! Why didn't you tell us?"

"I told Raph."

"And that made you think we'd find out?"

"Let's see the loot, April!"

"WOO-HOO!"

"I love it so much! It's perfect!"

"Where'd you get the funds for the rock, Case?"

"M'savings."

"You have savings?"

"Shut up."

"Congratulations. We have all been wondering when this would happen."

"Casey's a big coward."

"Aw, but he's MINE."

"GET A ROOM!"

"Get your own."

"Is Raph okay?"

"Dunno. He's been kinda quiet all night."

"What's he doing?"

"I think…"

"Yes, Leonardo?"

"He's meditating."